Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited
Arens, A.M.J.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Khadija, a rich peasant widow, was clearly upset:

"I inherited 9 bigha (3 acres) of land from my maternal uncle who brought me up, but my sons have registered my land in their names, they took my fingerprint."

"I have to listen to my husband. If he talks bad I have to listen, if he talks good I have to listen, whatever he talks, I have to listen. Otherwise there is no peace" (Anselma, a middle peasant woman in Jhagrapur)

These quotes from women in Jhagrapur, a village in Bangladesh, illustrate the position of a large number of women with regard to land ownership and unequal power relations. Jenneke Arens investigated the complex relation between women’s land ownership and their position in the household, the family and society. She also analysed the role that women’s land ownership could play in their empowerment and in challenging and changing structural gender and class inequalities, in particular from the point of view of poor peasant women. This empirical study is a follow-up of the 1970s village study “Jhagrapur: Poor Peasant and Women in a Village in Bangladesh” (Jenneke Arens & Jos van Beurden, 1977). It also covers changes in gender and class relations since 1975.
WOMEN, LAND AND POWER IN BANGLADESH

Jhagrapur revisited

Jenneke Arens
WOMEN, LAND AND POWER IN BANGLADESH

Jhagrapur revisited

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit

op woensdag 15 juni 2011, te 13.00 uur

door: Adrienne Maria Jacoba Arens
geboren te Hilversum
Promotiecommissie

Promotor: Prof. dr. H.W. van Schendel
Co-promotor: Dr. R. Saptari
Overige leden: Prof. dr. J.C. Breman
Prof. dr. M.A.F. Rutten
Prof. dr. N. Kabeer
Dr. E.W. Bal
Dr. R.A. Rutten

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
To the poor peasant women of Baniapukur
Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagrapur revisited
# Table of Contents

List of Tables, Boxes, Maps. Plates
Glossary
Abbreviations
Acknowledgements

1. **Introduction**
   
   1.1 Why this study?  
   1.2 Women and land rights  
   1.3 Structure-agency and empowerment  
   1.4 Methodology  
   1.5 A village in Bangladesh  
   1.6 Research questions  
   1.7 Structure of this book

2. **Debates on women, land and agency**
   
   2.1 Structure and agency  
   2.2 Power relations and women’s agency  
   2.3 The concepts of agency and empowerment  
   2.4 Assessment of women’s agency/empowerment  
   2.5 Women’s land rights and gender equality  
   2.6 Women’s control over land  
   2.7 Land reform  
   2.8 Summary and Conclusion

3. **Land and economic transformation**
   
   3.1 Land relations  
   3.2 The (non-)distribution of *khas* land  
   3.3 Women’s relationship to land  
   3.4 Introduction of the Green Revolution  
   3.5 Gender specific nature of agricultural transformation  
   3.6 Microfinance  
   3.7 Dowry and its consequences  
   3.8 Summary and Conclusion

4. **Gender ideology and social transformation**
   
   4.1 Islam in Bangladesh  
   4.2 Islam, moral values and gender ideology  
   4.3 Contradictory developments  
   4.4 Education and gender  
   4.5 Women’s reproductive rights and empowerment  
   4.6 Summary and Conclusion

5. **Jhagrapur revisited, class and gender**
   
   5.1 Changes in class relations  
   5.2 Land relations
5.3 Labour relations 89
5.4 The Green Revolution and the position of women 97
5.5 Microfinance and ‘poverty alleviation’ 103
5.6 Impact of global connections 107
5.7 The dowry system and its impact 109
5.8 Summary and Conclusion 115

6. Moral values, gender ideology and power 117
6.1 Islam in Jhagrapur 117
6.2 Global linkages and moral values 121
6.3 Moral values and poverty 128
6.4 Stigmatisation of women 131
6.5 Education 136
6.6 Family Planning 139
6.7 The village power structure 141
6.8 Summary and Conclusion 155

7. Women’s landownership in Jhagrapur 157
7.1 Women and land: three women 157
7.2 Inheritance practices 161
7.3 Women’s inheritance 1975/2007 163
7.4 Factors that play a role in women’s inheritance 168
7.5 Women’s land ownership 2007: the full picture 182
7.6 Women’s control over land 188
7.7 Summary and Conclusion 195

8. Women’s empowerment in the family and the community 197
8.1 Conjugal relations 198
8.2 Domestic relations 208
8.3 Kinship relations 212
8.4 The village power structure 214
8.5 Summary and Conclusion 217

9. Reflecting on women, land and power 219
9.1 Women’s relationship to land 219
9.2 Women’s land ownership and empowerment 223
9.3 Women, land and structural transformation 224
9.4 Perspectives for the future 227
9.5 In Conclusion 230

Bibliography 233
Summary 247
Samenvatting 253
Tables
Table 5.1 Classification of households in Jhagrapur 1975/1999  
Table 5.2 Class mobility of households between 1975 and 1999 per class  
Table 5.3 Class mobility of new generation households 1999 as of 1999  
Table 5.4 Class mobility of 1975 generation households as of 1999  
Table 5.5 Distribution of land among households 1975/1999  
Table 5.6 Distribution of land among the classes 1975/1999  
Table 7.1 Women who inherited parental land 1975/2007  
Table 7.2 Women of the 1975 sample who inherited parental land by 1975 and by 2007  
Table 7.3 Women who said they will or may inherit parental land in the future (2007)  
Table 7.4 Widows who inherited land from their husbands per class (2007)  
Table 7.5 Inheritance according to distance to parental village (2007)  
Table 7.6 Women who sold all inherited land according to distance to parental village (2007)  
Table 7.7 Class background of landed parental households with daughters married in Jhagrapur (2007)  
Table 7.8 Class-wise distribution of daughters married within Jhagrapur and inheritance (2007)  
Table 7.9 Education of women and class (2007)  
Table 7.10 Education, inheritance of land and class (2007)  
Table 7.11 Women who inherited land from their parents per class (2007)  
Table 7.12 Women who received purchased land in their name per class (2007)  
Table 7.13 Women who received land (inherited and purchased) per class (2007)  
Table 7.14 Women who lost all received land per class (2007)  
Table 7.15 Women’s actual ownership of land per class (2007)  

Boxes
Box 5.1 Capitalist entrepreneur joint household  
Box 5.2 Irregularities with deep tube wells  
Box 5.3 Poor peasants take land back  
Box 5.4 Labourers hired from other villages during peak seasons  
Box 5.5 Labourers from Jhagrapur go for work to other districts in the lean seasons  
Box 5.6 Abdul, an energetic hard working poor peasant  
Box 5.7 Ali and his wife Fatima, an old landless peasant couple  
Box 5.8 Shahnaz, struggling hard for survival  
Box 5.9 First meeting of a new Grameen Bank group in Jhagrapur  
Box 5.10 BRAC lost 150,000 Taka on loans  
Box 5.11 Abdulla and Nazma have five daughters  
Box 5.12 Bibi, trapped by a rich peasant
Box 6.1 Meena’s husband wants her to wear a burka 119
Box 6.2 A group of men jailed for arranging a marriage for a minor girl 127
Box 6.3 Rushina and Shahina do not want to marry again 130
Box 6.4 Conversation at the rice mill 132
Box 6.5 Distribution of rice under the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme 144
Box 6.6 Appropriation of the big communal pond by the rich 151
Box 7.1 Farida purchased land by herself and registered it on her own name 183
Box 7.2 Sharda inherited land from her father, but had to sell it 185
Box 8.1 Rumana, Anselma and Mariama have to listen to their husband 200
Box 8.2 Two kilos of meat 203
Box 8.3 Hamida: “I am intelligent” 205
Box 8.4 Rakhia had to give up her shop 206
Box 8.5 Hazera is in control of the household income 209
Box 8.6 Nahar - her fifth marriage caused a split in the village leadership 216

Maps
Map of Bangladesh xv
Map of Meherpur District xvi
Map of Jhagrapur xvii, 10

Plates
Plate 1 Road to Jhagrapur, off the Gangni-Alamdanga road in 2000. 5
Plate 2 Infrastructure has improved. Labourers are asphalting the road through Jhagrapur. 9
Plate 3 Women have different positions and identities in the various arenas. 17
Plate 4 The household is a “complex matrix of relationships” with conflicting interests. 26
Plate 5 Nijera Kori landless women’s group in Noakhali District in 1985. 31
Plate 6 Paddy fields with a jute field in the background. 40
Plate 7 Drying paddy at a rich peasant’s homestead. 41
Plate 8 Women’s work is mostly done within the homestead. 45
Plate 9 Deep tube well (DTW) operator. 48
Plate 10 Poor peasant woman’s homestead. 49
Plate 11 NGO worker collecting loan instalments from members of a savings group in Jhagrapur. 53
Plate 12 Election posters in 2006 with Awami League and BNP candidates next to each other. 61
Plate 13 A ‘good’ woman is modest and shy. 63
Plate 14 Women are much more visible: women and girls walking through the village in 2000. 64
Table of contents

Plate 15 Women going to the garments factory - Savar, Dhaka. 65
Plate 16 Girls in primary school in Jhagrapur in 1998. 68
Plate 17 Peasant carrying paddy seedlings. 76
Plate 18 Shallow tube well (STW). 77
Plate 19 Fields are now mostly ploughed by power tiller. 81
Plate 20 Brick factory in Jhagrapur in 1999. 83
Plate 21 The bricks were made by hand with a mall. 84
Plate 22 Digging a fishpond. 87
Plate 23 Transporting paddy by buffalo cart. 90
Plate 24 Van (transport rickshaw) going through the village. 93
Plate 25 Agricultural labourers prefer to work on contract. 93
Plate 26 Grinding wheat by jata in 1975. 97
Plate 27 Women taking tobacco leaves into the tobacco curing house. 101
Plate 28 Widow collecting leaves for her goats. 101
Plate 29 Sewing t-shirts in a garment factory in Savar near Dhaka. 102
Plate 30: Grameen Bank group meeting with a Grameen Gangni office staff member. 105
Plate 31 Tying a nose-flower ornament to a bride. 109
Plate 32 Durga Puja ceremony, immersion of the Goddess in the canal. 118
Plate 33 Bengali calendar poster of Saddam Hossain. 120
Plate 34 Baul (Fokhir) couple in Jhagrapur in 1975. 122
Plate 35 Baul woman performing at Baul festival in Gulapnagar, Kushtia District April 2001 123
Plate 36 ‘Fair & Lovely’ advertisement, produced by Hindustan Unilever above a shop in a small town. 123
Plate 37 Mobile phone advertisement boards in a small rural town. 125
Plate 38 Poor peasant woman running her shop. 128
Plate 39 Drying paddy at a rice mill in Jhagrapur. 132
Plate 40 Woman boiling paddy at a rice mill in Jhagrapur. 133
Plate 41 Jhagrapur primary school in. 136
Plate 42 Women’s adult education group in 2000. 139
Plate 43 An NGO worker has come to the village to give contraceptive injections. 140
Plate 44 Distribution of ‘ration’ food grains. 143
Plate 45 The stone is being taken away from the weighing tray after one of the UC members told the weighing man to do so. 143
Plate 46: Kati the chowkidar in 1975 with his son who would later take over his job as chowkidar. 145
Plate 47 The board says: “To give and to take dowry, both are punishable crimes. Announcement Sholotaka Union Council.” 146
Plate 48 Inauguration plaque for the college. It can still be seen that ‘Jhagrapur’ has been removed and above it the new name ‘Morka’ has been written. 149
Plate 49 The boro pukur in 1975. 150
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate 50</th>
<th>The <em>boro pukur</em>, now leased out to breed fish and divided in four parts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plate 51</td>
<td>The village mosque has been extended and beautified with the <em>boro pukur</em> lease money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 52</td>
<td>After her land was grabbed, all Halima had left was a shopping bag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 53</td>
<td>Women in a village in the area at a ‘khana’, a meal in commemoration of the death of the father of a women married in Jhagrapur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 54</td>
<td>Some poor peasant widows inherited only house-land as that was the only land their husband had.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 55</td>
<td>Women are much more visible and purdah practices are changing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 56</td>
<td>Landless widow, her brother has registered all their illiterate father’s land in his name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 57</td>
<td>Widow overseeing a group of labourers who thresh her paddy by machine on contract.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 58</td>
<td>Women take care of their children but most of their husbands have a final say in major decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 59</td>
<td>Woman making <em>ruti</em> in her kitchen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 60</td>
<td>A lot depends on the kind of relationship between husband and wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 61</td>
<td>Women constructing a new house. More joint families have broken up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 62</td>
<td>A group of women labourers passing through the village on their way to work (food for work).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Glossary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aman dhan</td>
<td>Aman paddy (harvested in November/December)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ana</td>
<td>one-sixteenth part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansar</td>
<td>paramilitary force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aus dhan</td>
<td>Aus paddy (harvested in August)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bab</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bangsa</td>
<td>patrilineage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bari</td>
<td>homestead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baul</td>
<td>mystic minstrel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>benami</td>
<td>anonymous, held in another person’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bichar</td>
<td>village court session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bidesh</td>
<td>foreign country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bigha</td>
<td>measure of land – 1 acre = 3 bigha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bis</td>
<td>poison, pesticides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bodmas</td>
<td>wicked, vicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boisko bhata</td>
<td>pension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boro</td>
<td>big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boro lok</td>
<td>rich people (literally: big people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boro pukur</td>
<td>big pond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buddhi</td>
<td>intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burka</td>
<td>women’s dress which covers her entire body and face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chakri</td>
<td>job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>char</td>
<td>newly formed land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choto lok</td>
<td>poor people (literally: small people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chowkidar</td>
<td>guard, watchman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gibi</td>
<td>demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dacoity</td>
<td>robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dada</td>
<td>grandfather from father’s side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dal</td>
<td>lentils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dalal</td>
<td>middleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desh</td>
<td>country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dhan</td>
<td>paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan kora</td>
<td>giving a gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dheki</td>
<td>traditional foot pedal to husk rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durga Puja</td>
<td>Hindu festival devoted to goddess Durga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eid</td>
<td>Muslim festival at the end of the Ramadan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eid-gah</td>
<td>field where the men hold their Ed prayers together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fatwa</td>
<td>judgement/order given by religious leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghorjamai</td>
<td>husband who lives in his in-laws house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gram</td>
<td>village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gur</td>
<td>cane sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadith</td>
<td>narrations concerning words and deeds of prophet Mohammed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halkhata</td>
<td>occasion where customers have to pay their outstanding bills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haram</td>
<td>forbidden, impure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hilla</td>
<td>practice of interim marriage; required before a man can take back a wife whom he divorced earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hingsa</td>
<td>jealous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>izzat</td>
<td>honour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jhamela</td>
<td>trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jomi/jamin</td>
<td>land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jata</td>
<td>hand-operated grinding stones to make flour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joutuk</td>
<td>dowry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaj</td>
<td>work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karon</td>
<td>reason, because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>katha</td>
<td>measure of land - 20 katha = 1 bigha, also a measure of volume - 1 katha = 5 seer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khana</td>
<td>food, also used for a meal in honour of a deceased person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khas</td>
<td>fallow government land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khub</td>
<td>very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kisti</td>
<td>instalment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kobiraj</td>
<td>quack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kosto</td>
<td>difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lajja</td>
<td>shame, shy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lakh</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lathi</td>
<td>long stick, used as a weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madrashah</td>
<td>Islamic school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mahajan</td>
<td>moneylender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>malik</td>
<td>owner, boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mama</td>
<td>maternal uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maulana</td>
<td>religious leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maund</td>
<td>measurement - 1 maund = 40 sheer, equivalent to 37.65 kilograms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mohr</td>
<td>dower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mondol</td>
<td>traditional village leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mughals</td>
<td>Muslim invaders in the 15th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mullah</td>
<td>religious leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>munish</td>
<td>day labourer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>natok</td>
<td>theatre play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nongra</td>
<td>dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obhab</td>
<td>want, absence (of food)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>para</td>
<td>part of village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pet</td>
<td>stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poisha</td>
<td>cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poushani</td>
<td>share raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>purdah</td>
<td>veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rajniti</td>
<td>politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rickshaw</td>
<td>bicycle taxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ruti</td>
<td>flat bread</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
samiti  savings groups
sari    female dress
shalish traditional village arbitration court
shanti  peace
sheer   measurement - 1 sheer = 0.94 kilograms
somaj   community
sontrasi criminals, terrorists; often used for underground party members
Taka (Tk) Bangladesh currency
talak   divorce
tupi    hat
van     goods carrier rickshaw, also used to transport people
zamindar landlords
Zindabad Long Live

Abbreviations
BDHS  Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey
BNP   Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC  Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CPD   Centre for Policy Dialogue
DTW   deep tube well
EPCP  East Pakistan Communist Party
FSSAP Female Secondary Schools Assistance Project
HYV   high yielding variety
IRDP  Integrated Rural Development Programme
JMB   Jama’atul MujahIdeen Bangladesh
NGO   Non Governmental Organisation
NK    Nijera Kori
PBCP  Purbo Banglar Communist Party (East Bengal Communist Party)
STW   shallow tube well
UN    United Nations
UNDP  United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
VGD   Vulnerable Group Development
VGF   Vulnerable Group Feeding
WB    World Bank
WID   Women in Development
WFP   World Food Programme
Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagrapur revisited
Acknowledgements

This book could never have been written without the warm friendship, generous hospitality and cooperation of the large number of women, men and children of Jhagrapur who welcomed me in their village and homes. They were my teachers by sharing their lives, experiences, happiness, worries, ideas and perceptions with me during the long process that this study has gone through. I am highly indebted and profoundly thankful to all of them first and foremost. Special thanks go to Lozena and Golzar, their son Uzzol, his wife Laki and grandchildren Suborna and Polash for their hospitality, friendship, patience and the numerous discussions we had on various issues. They shared their home and lives with me during the major part of my fieldwork. Special thanks also go to Daud and Jahanara who generously took me into their home during my last fieldwork visits. Their friendship and the experiences they shared with me also taught me many things.

I am extremely thankful to Willem van Schendel who supervised my work from the very beginning and gave countless constructive comments and suggestions. He patiently saw my work through to the end and never complained about the regular delays and interruptions due to other engagements that I was involved in. Ratna Saptari, who agreed to join as supervisor and co-promotor in 2004, shared her valuable insights and gave important comments and suggestions, in particular with regard to the gender and agency dimension. Her encouragement, especially in moments of doubt and lack of self-confidence, was a great support for me as well and I thank her for all that.

Many people - friends, colleagues and family members - have contributed to this study and I extend my gratefulness to them and thank them all. I am particularly grateful to my long time friend Shyamala Devi Rathore; she initially convinced me to take up this study and encouraged me throughout the years. She has heavily contributed to my understanding of issues from within through sharing her own lived experiences of rural life in India, combined with her in-depth knowledge as an economist. She and her family - Rohini, Siddarth, Madan and her mother Mariama - adopted me in their family and contributed by taking care of me during the periods that I stayed with them to do part of my writing. Miriam Wolters, my best friend since our psychology student days in the 1960s, has also been a strong and never failing support. She generously gave her time and patience to read, reread and comment on my chapters and was never bored with it. Her moral support and help to clear my often confused thoughts and restructure and rephrase chapters and sentences has been very important for me.

Many other friends have contributed through discussions and comments and by welcoming me in their homes in Dhaka before, in between and after my fieldwork in the village. First of all Rokeya Rahman Kabeer who invited me to stay with her in Dhaka and who inspired me with her stories about Saptagram. The news of her untimely death in 2000, which I read in an online Bangladesh daily, came as a great shock to me. Joke Muylwijk, a friend since my earlier Jhagrapur days, read some of my writings during the first years of this study and provided valuable input. My
friend Meghna Guhathakurta gave valuable comments and suggestions during the later years and she generously shared her home with me. Several other friends have given me a place to stay in Dhaka and were there for me at different points in time: Jan van der Laan, a friend since my earlier Jhagrapur days as well, and Lisbet Arn; Nila Matin, who had done a great job in translating the first Jhagrapur book in Bengali, and Anjan Datta; Anja Rudnick who gave me a great opportunity to share in her fieldwork in Malaysia among Bangladeshi female migrant garment workers in 2000 and help her with translating from Bengali. Syeda Farhana, Manosh Chowdhury, Hasna Hena, Korshed Alam, Khushi Kabir and Kamal Uddin need to be mentioned as well. I enjoyed the hospitality of all of them and the exchanges we had about my work and about Bangladesh. I also thoroughly enjoyed the luxury of a warm bath in their houses after coming from the village during cold winter days.

My colleagues at Clean Clothes Campaign in Amsterdam have since long encouraged me to persevere in my writing. I am extremely grateful to them for their understanding and collegiality. My friends Ruth Waterman, Jan Reynders, Loes Keizers, Anjana (Tang) Suvarnanonda, Claudia Theile, Peter Custers, Sumati Nair and my housemates Nienja Brouwer, Firouzeh Rad, Mojtaba Hazeri, Anita Vermeulen, Bab Gons, Leontine Wennekers and her sons Ish and Bo gave me opportunities to share my thoughts, emotions, insecurities and experiences and to discuss my ideas and findings in different ways and at different times. Sensei Wendi Dragonfire and my training mates were important for my physical and mental balance during all these years and my physiotherapist Rogier van Asdonck added to my physical wellbeing after too many long hours at the computer. I am also grateful to Miriam McCabe who did a great job editing the English text and to Rita Ramperti for the final editing of the Dutch summary.

Special thoughts go to my parents Coco (Josef Ferdinand) Arens and Corrie Arens Peperzak who taught us compassion and inclusion. I am grateful that they lived long, but sadly not long enough to see the final result. My sisters Kee, Josien, Paula, Maria, Liesbeth and Corien and my brothers Pedro, Hans, Koos, Vincent and Bas and their partners and children were always with me in my thoughts as well and added to my wellbeing throughout the years. I am particularly grateful to my brother Bas for making the three maps, to my brother Pedro for commenting on some of the chapters and editing the Dutch summary and to my niece Sietske Sips for designing the cover and doing the final lay-out.

Finally, I hope that all those whom I forgot here but who supported me in some way or other all the years, will forgive me for not mentioning their names.

Jenneke Arens
February 2011
Maps

Map 1  Bangladesh
Map 2  Meherpur District (*is Jhagrapur. It is situated one km from the Gangni Alamdanga road.)
Map 3  Jhagrapur, cartography Bas Arens.  Source Google Earth
1 Introduction

Khadija, a rich peasant widow, called me into her house. She was clearly upset: “I inherited 9 bigha (3 acres) of land from my mama (mother’s brother) who brought me up, but my sons have registered my land in their names, they took my fingerprint.”

Anselma, a middle peasant woman looked at me and said: “I have to listen to my husband. If he talks bad I have to listen, if he talks good I have to listen, whatever he talks I have to listen. Otherwise there is no peace”

The above quotes from women in Jhagrapur (pseudonym), a village in Bangladesh, illustrate the diversity of experiences and positions of women with regard to land ownership and power. This study is about the relationship between women, land, empowerment and social transformation. Do women who own land have more power in their social relations than women who do not, and can land ownership contribute to a structural transformation of gender and class relations? Theories and debates on women’s land rights, structure-agency and women’s agency/empowerment will be used to examine factors that facilitate or constrain women’s land ownership and to explore the question of women’s land ownership as a facilitator in their role in structural transformation of society. I will juxtapose these theories and debates with empirical findings collected in Jhagrapur in 1974/1975 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980) and between 1998 and 2009. In chapter 2 these theories and debates will be discussed in more detail.

1.1 Why this study?
My aim is to contribute to theories and debates on processes of structural transformation of Bangladesh society, in particular with regard to gender and class relations, and their applications in practice. Surprisingly there are only a few studies on women and land ownership in Bangladesh, although land is the most important means of production in rural Bangladesh. Some studies on women and gender issues have included a section on women and land, but gender issues and the gender aspect of land relations have been largely ignored in studies that focus on land, poverty and peasantry questions. Reflecting the non-recognition of women’s contribution to agricultural production, there are only a few programmes in Bangladesh that focus on women’s land rights and land ownership. Instead, income-generating and microfinance programmes form the bulk of existing programmes targeting women. These programmes ignore the importance of land as the main source of livelihood security. As a result of the lack of studies and programmes, information on the extent of women’s land ownership and its impact on the position of women is scarce. This study aims to fill this gap.

My main social motivation to take up this study lies in the extremely precarious situation of poor peasant women in Bangladesh, especially of landless widows and divorced women; they have very few opportunities to earn an income to survive. The root causes of their poverty and exclusion from productive resources lie in the structurally unequal and oppressive class and gender relations as well as in
unequal global relations. With this study I hope to contribute to an insight into what land ownership could mean for a significant structural improvement of the lives of poor women (and men) in Bangladesh. I also hope that these insights will lead to the acknowledgement of poor people’s just demand for land redistribution and consequently bold steps by the state, NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) and national and international civil society resulting in the implementation of existing policies for gender and class equality and the design of new effective policies to structurally eradicate these injustices. To design and implement such new policies will certainly require courage and determination, as they will have to go against dominant neoliberal forces.

1.2 Women and land rights
Despite decades of struggle by women against male domination and discriminating patriarchal norms, gender inequalities are still prevailing and there is a great gender imbalance in the ownership of land. The central issue in the debate on women and land rights is the demand for women’s equal access to and ownership of land as the most important productive resource and source of livelihood security for households in rural agrarian societies. Productive resources are also related to both economic and political power; thus inequality in access to and ownership of resources translates into a gap in access to and utilisation of power (Deere & Doss 2006). Feminist activists and scholars worldwide have since long emphasised the importance of women’s rights to productive resources for their economic and social position. They have argued that women’s lack of ownership of resources and a denial of their active role in the production process are important factors in their low socio-economic status (Beneria & Sen 1981; Mies 1987, Clark 1993). Studies have also shown that household members do not necessarily benefit equally from a household’s resources. Women and children often lose out (Folbre 1986; Agarwal 1994). Women’s independent land rights can make an important difference to their livelihood and wellbeing. However, opinions differ as to how much land rights change women’s position in the household and in society, and under which circumstances. This question will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Land rights for women have been advocated in particular by feminists and scholars from countries in the South with largely rural agrarian economies. However, even in countries where women have land rights many women still do not own any land, although it is often difficult to assess to what extent land is owned by women. This is also the case in Bangladesh. An obstacle in the assessment of the extent of women’s ownership of land is that in many countries the proportion of land owned by women is not exactly known because there are no reliable gender-disaggregated statistics on land ownership, i.e. in statistical data it is not recorded whether land is owned by women or by men.

In this study concrete data will be given about the extent and nature of women’s land ownership in Jhagrapur, the village under study. I will also explore the question of what women’s relationship to land is and how this has changed over the last 35
years. Factors that play a role in women claiming their land rights, such as class, education and marital practices, and the impact of land ownership on the position of women have been examined as well and will be discussed in detail. Apart from ownership of land, control over the land owned and its produce turned out to be equally important. As we will see, a woman’s ownership of land does not guarantee that she will have control over it; women face various obstacles in having control over their land and its produce.

1.3 Structure-agency and empowerment

In her path-breaking study *A Field of One’s Own* on women and land issues in South Asia Agarwal (1994:38, 39) has argued that gender equality of land rights is an indicator of women’s economic empowerment and that it can act as a facilitator in challenging gender inequities. These are important arguments; it means that land would be an effective asset for women’s agency to come out of their subordinate position and could play an important role in structural social transformation.

In capitalist male-dominated societies the distribution of land is highly skewed, both between rich and poor and between men and women. This unequal distribution of land is a result of structurally unequal class and gender relations. Gender and class structures are interrelated and both concern power hierarchies and subordination of the less powerful. The position of women in gender and in class relations determines the advantages or disadvantages and the choices that women have as individuals and collectively within these structures. Their position also largely determines the amount of power that women have to change or maintain social structures. In other words, structures mould and constrain women’s agency. However, the shape that gender and class relations take varies in different societies as a result of structural variables like differences in history, culture, religion, ideology, moral values and the structure of the state. Moreover, as we will see, structures can be contradictory and this can sometimes provide space for women’s agency as well. When studying women’s relation to land, gender and class inequalities in the distribution of land and its impact on the position of women should therefore be placed in the specific social context (Jacobs 2003) and the various aspects of both gender and class structures should be taken into account. For this reason an important part of this study will deal with the specific social context (culture, religion, ideologies, moral values) of Bangladesh society and of the village (chapters 4 and 6).

A complete study should not be limited to structural aspects alone as a structural approach is mostly concerned with large processes in the wider social context

---

1 Gender relations are socially constructed relations of power between women and men and are reflected among others in the division of resources and labour between women and men. As is now common practice, I use the term ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’. The term ‘sex’ has a more biological connotation, whereas ‘gender’ refers to sociological factors that account for inequalities between men and women. Men and women are also shaped by the structure, culture and ideology of their society. For an excellent and elaborate definition of gender see for instance Beneria & Roldan (1987). Class is a model of stratification and is ‘primarily concerned with who has control over key economic resources in society’ (Grant Evans 1993: 208, 224).
while the impact of smaller social units like the household and the family tends to be ignored. The latter, however, are particularly relevant for a study concerning the position of women. Women's lives and their actions mostly take place in these settings and are mostly shaped by these structures, within the larger context of society, of course. Therefore, the question regarding the role of women's agency in structural social transformation needs to be studied within both the smaller and the wider arenas.

Giddens (1979) has argued that structure and agency are mutually dependent and that structure is not only constraining but also enabling. The question then becomes can structure (gender and class relations, culture, religion, ideologies, etc.) enable women's agency to transform gender oppressive structures if women are shaped by these same structures or is this contradictory? In how far does structure determine women's agency. Do women only reproduce existing oppressive structures? Or can women's actions go around these structures and produce new liberating structures? To what extent are women agents of change and can they challenge and change structures? If so what factors play a role? I will explore each of these questions in the context of Jhagrapur.

Before beginning to answer the above questions we need to define agency more clearly. The concepts of agency and empowerment are closely related. Both refer to (a process of) taking control of one's own life. Empowerment has been conceptualised as a process of transformation of structural social inequalities (DAWN 1985; Moser 1989). The term ‘agency’ does not necessarily imply structural transformation; agency can also reinforce structure. Thus, when studying social transformation, ‘empowerment’ in the above sense would be a more appropriate term. However, as I will elaborate later, the term ‘empowerment’ has become problematic. Gradually over the last few decades the aspect of social transformation has largely disappeared resulting in a multi-interpretable use of ‘empowerment’. This has severely reduced the appeal and usefulness of the concept of empowerment for people interested in social change from a grassroots perspective. Nevertheless I will mostly use the term ‘empowerment’ in its original conceptualisation. When studying empowerment an important question is how to assess empowerment. I will largely draw on Kabeer's reflections on the measurement of empowerment (Kabeer 1999) and discuss these in more detail in chapter 2. In chapter 9 I will make an assessment of the usefulness of this measurement of empowerment.

In summary, this study examines the relation between women’s land ownership, their empowerment and their role in structural social transformation. What impact does land ownership have concretely on women’s lives and on existing power relations, not only at the individual level in the household and family but also in the wider context on the community and at the ideological level? I will place these questions in the specific context of oppressive class and gender structures and processes of economic and social transformation that are taking place in rural Bangladesh, particularly seen from the point of view of the women in Jhagrapur.
1.4 Methodology
This study has gone through a long process; it has spread over a period of 35 years (1974-2009). To examine the questions posed I have used research data collected in 1974/75 in the village ‘Jhagrapur’ (literally ‘Quarrel Village’) in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District in western Bangladesh (Map 2 on page viii, Plate 1) and a restudy of the same village between 1998 and 2009. In 2004 I decided to use the village restudy specifically to examine the issue of women, land and empowerment and the changes therein over the years. I have known Jhagrapur and its people since 1974 when I lived there with Jos van Beurden for one year to study power relations between rich and poor peasants and the position of women (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980). Since, I kept in contact with the people through visits and letters and I kept up my knowledge of the Bengali language.

Advantages and disadvantages of village (re)studies
I am aware of my own limitations as a white western outsider in the village and not mastering the Bengali language perfectly. Nevertheless, an advantage of such a long-term village study is that it is an opportunity to study the issues more deeply, establish more personal contacts and get more acquainted with people’s lives and problems. This creates mutual familiarity and friendship and builds trust; it certainly helped in collecting reliable data and assessing these correctly. Besides, by studying the village over a longer period it was possible to check and cross check information. Another advantage is that not only a picture of women, land and empowerment can be given at particular moments in time, but also of changes that have taken place over time. I realise, however, that the time-span between snapshots taken at different points in time cannot be taken as linear; it does not say anything about the process in between (Kloos 1997). Also the researcher’s own
memory plays a role, but memory is often coloured and distorted. To avoid this I have relied as much as possible on the written material of the earlier study.

A disadvantage of a village restudy is that it may be more difficult to look critically at one’s own previous work, potentially resulting in repeating errors. Moreover, the researcher as researcher and as a person may have changed and therefore may look at things differently, consciously or unconsciously (Streefkerk 1993). My earlier belief in revolutions that would fundamentally change societies has undergone some changes as a result of outcomes of revolutions elsewhere. These revolutions did not bring about the egalitarian society that was aimed for and especially did not fundamentally change gender and class relations. This may have affected my perceptions then and now, although my main aim to struggle against structural injustices and inequalities between people still stands firm. Fundamental structural change has proven to be a much more complex process than was imagined in the 1960s and 70s. The world has gone through a process of extensive penetration of capitalism and the present onslaught of neo-liberal globalisation.

Finally, a disadvantage of village studies is that it is difficult to generalise findings, especially in a country with more than 60,000 villages, a total population of some 160 million people and some regional variations from coastal and river areas to relatively dry areas such as the Jhagrapur area which is only seldom hit by floods. Similarly, the proximity of the District to the Indian border creates different dynamics than in Districts that are in the middle of the country or that are close to the capital Dhaka. To balance this disadvantage to some extent my research has not been completely confined to the village. Like the study in 1975 it covers a wider area of social networks and issues with wider relevance. Furthermore, I have regularly visited other villages in the area and gained relevant information from people there. By comparing the information gathered in this way to Jhagrapur and to what people in Jhagrapur told me about the area, I obtained a good insight into the area as a whole. In turn I could compare this insight with my general knowledge of Bangladesh from frequent visits, interactions with friends and colleagues, publications, the media and the Bangladesh solidarity work that I have been involved in since the late 1970s. Finally, my experiences as an activist engaged in various social issues and my general knowledge about global issues has helped me place developments in Jhagrapur in a much wider perspective.

**Fieldwork and data collection**

Between 1998 and 2009 I spent roughly seven months altogether doing fieldwork. The almost yearly fieldwork visits (except 2003) lasted from several months to a few days and took place during different months and different seasons - harvest, pre-harvest, post-harvest and the monsoon season. As in the 1974/75 study, I collected data mostly through participant observation, daily interaction and informal individual and group conversations with a wide variety of people and a few indepth case studies, paying special attention to women’s own perceptions. In-depth interviews and (group) discussions were usually more difficult than the informal
daily conversations and other interactions. Often other household members or
visitors passed by, a child had to be attended to, or there were other interferences
that changed the dynamics. Several women and men from all classes were key
informants. They contributed greatly to this study as they knew much, were eager
to talk, and often because they were friends who entrusted me with sensitive
information.

Other important sources of information have been the village Union Council mem-
ber and the village chowkidar;\(^2\) NGO workers and primary and high school teachers,
who provided me with official and sometimes informal information. After a few
fruitless attempts to obtain official land records I gave up on it, also because I
doubted the usefulness of such records as they are mostly not up to date.

To assess the changes in the socio-economic position of the households since
1975 I carried out a survey of all 419 households in the village in December 1998
and January 1999. The survey concentrated on land holdings, sharecropping, hiring
in or out labour power, other sources of income, household composition and enrol-
ment in education. The village had expanded considerably since 1975 because
sons had grown up and started their own households and a lot of families had
moved within the village. Hence, it was difficult at first to identify all the different
households, but with the help of villagers and the old data and by means of the
survey, I managed to map the new village settings in my mind again. Because I
decided to focus specifically on women and land during the course of this study I
performed a second survey on women’s land ownership in December 2006 and
January 2007. This survey covered 85 percent of all the households.

When I started fieldwork in 1998 I noticed that I was able to take notes and write
down people’s answers in their presence which was not the case in 1974/75, as
it would scare them from telling anything or make them tell things in a different
way (Arens 1982). The villagers had become used to things being written down by
outsiders due to activities and surveys by NGOs. The downside of doing a survey
was that some people thought that this meant that they would get benefits out of it
and therefore would tell what they thought might maximize their benefits. By cross
checking with other villagers and casually asking people similar questions at other
times, I am confident that most of the data I obtained is correct.

I always made it clear that my work would not benefit any villager directly; it was
purely for my own purpose - to write a book. I also told people that I hoped that
one day this book would be of some benefit to poor people in Bangladesh, like
the earlier Jhagrapur book which they were all familiar with by then (in 1999 I
distributed sixty copies of the Bengali version of the book to villagers).

\(^2\) Chowkidar means literally guard. The village chowkidar is an officially appointed liaison between the
village and the police and administration. He has to report births, deaths, etc. He also has to inform
villagers about meetings, when to come to receive their food rations, etc.
Whereas in 1974/75 we stayed independently, this was not possible for this study as my stays were more temporary and with long intermissions; besides I was ‘a woman alone’. One of the befriended middle class families in the village with whom I had stayed during earlier visits welcomed me in their home and till 2007 I stayed with them during my fieldwork periods. In 2006 I received a letter from them that they had moved to Gangni and when I came for fieldwork in October that year they explained the reason why. They had been scared by a country bomb thrown by underground party members at their house because they had not paid the demanded toll money. The bomb had not hurt anyone and only left a burn mark on a wall of the house, but it had been enough to scare my friends out of the village. Fearing for my safety they did not allow me to stay in Jhagrapur and made me commute to the village daily. During my next fieldwork visits I decided to stay in Jhagrapur itself again, this time with a befriended poor peasant couple.

Apart from two male college students from Jhagrapur who helped me initially with the survey in 1998, I never worked with a research assistant. I would have liked to have an English-speaking assistant for some time, especially because my Bengali was not always sufficient to understand everything the villagers told me. There were no villagers who could help me with this, as none of them knew English beyond their limited high school or college English. When I proposed to my host family in 2006 to bring a friend from Dhaka to assist me for some time they advised against this. Their advice was mainly related to the fact that armed underground groups had intensified their activities in the area again. They argued that it would be difficult for them to give protection to a person who would be completely new to the area. My presence was different, they argued, because of my position as a foreigner and being known in the area since long. (I myself have never faced any problems with underground groups.)

1.5 A village in Bangladesh

Jhagrapur is situated in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District in western Bangladesh. An important motivation to select this village in 1974 was that it was remote and therefore would be more representative as the majority of villages in Bangladesh were remote. Proximity to Dhaka or other big cities would show different dynamics, e.g. people would more easily move to the city to find work. Another motivation was that there were no village leaders with an apparent ‘relief mentality’ and no influential political party leaders, as that would influence the power dynamics. Lastly, hardly any socio-

3 The villagers had decided to give us a small house behind the school that had been used by the youth club of the village and we had made it suitable for living, adding windowpanes and doors.

4 In 1975 Meherpur District was still part of Kushtia District. Thana literally means police station, but also refers to an administrative unit. Gangni is a small town at about 5 km. from Jhagrapur. It used to be a one-hour walk from Gangni to Jhagrapur, 3 km on the clay road from Gangni to Alamdanga and then 2 km on mud roads. These roads were very slippery in the rainy season and sometimes people would sink knee-deep in the mud. Now all the roads are metalled. The road through the village was metalled only in 2002. Since then the village is accessible by rickshaws and vans and there is a bus service on the main road at 1 km from the village.
economic research had been done in the relatively backward district (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 8,9).

Over the years Jhagrapur has become less remote (Plate 2). Whereas in 1974/75 it was impossible to reach Dhaka in one day from the village, now Dhaka is only 8 hours away from Gangni by direct bus. Like most villages, Jhagrapur has become a ‘global village’ due to improved infrastructure, the penetration of mass media and mobile phones, and the influence of multinational companies. The Green Revolution has been introduced and NGOs have entered the village (although not until the mid 1990s). Similar developments have taken place all over the country and they have led to the economic and social transformation of Bangladesh society. We will see in particular what effect this has had on gender and class relations.

The village has expanded considerably since 1975 (Map 3), both area-wise and population-wise, mostly due to population growth and the nuclearisation of households. Only two families have immigrated into the village. In 1975 we counted 173 households with a total population of 1017 persons; in 1999 the number of households had increased to 419 with a population of 1678 and by 2007 there were 506 households (I did not register the total population number at that time). During the period of this study three more paras (neighbourhoods) were created; Jhagrapur

5 85 percent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, around 10 percent is Hindu and the rest is Christian, Buddhist or Animist.
6 “After the cyclone of 1970 and the 1971 Independence War, Bangladesh had received fantastic amounts of money and relief materials ‘most of which never reached the poor while it degraded many to the position of helpless beggars’, as people complained.” (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 8)
now counts 8 paras instead of 5 paras in 1975. More and more agricultural land has been converted into homesteads; this process is still continuing.

With regard to the pseudonym ‘Jhagrapur’ that we had given to the village in the 1970s, opinions of villagers differed whether to change the nickname, keep it, or use the real name of the village for this study. Finally I decided to stick to ‘Jhagrapur’ for the sake of continuation and recognition since this is the name under which the village has become known through the 1974/75 study. For reasons of privacy I have not used people’s real names. None of the names used in this study refer to people who have accidentally the same name.

1.6 Research questions
In summary, the following main questions will be investigated in this study:

1 What is women’s relationship to land and has this changed over the last three decades? To what extent do women own and control land and what factors facilitate or constrain this? Are there any class differences in women’s relationship to land?

2 What impact does women’s land ownership have on their agency/empowerment? Do women who own land have more power in the various arenas (such as household, family, community) than women who do not?
Does land ownership give women power to challenge or change unequal gender and class relations and in this way contributes to a structural transformation of existing power structures? Are there any class differences in women’s contribution to such social transformation?

1.7 Structure of this book

In chapter 2 I discuss the theories and debates that have informed this study and their relevance for the research questions. The structure-agency debate and Giddens structuration theory (Giddens 1979) is useful to analyse structural factors that facilitate or constrain women’s agency to acquire and control land as well as women’s role in structural social transformation. The concepts of agency and empowerment will be discussed in relation to the question how they connect to structural transformation. In order to be able to assess whether land ownership empowers women I will explore Kabeer’s proposed measurement of empowerment (Kabeer 1999) and a few other suggested indicators of empowerment, such as education and violence. Next, I will discuss debates on women’s land rights. These debates place the topic of this study in the context of feminist struggle against subjugation of women and their demands for gender equality. At the end of the chapter I will discuss the issue of land reform and its (ir)relevance for women’s acquisition of land.

Chapters 3 and 4 give background information and serve to place the study in the larger context of Bangladesh society and the processes of economic and social transformation that are taking place. In chapter 3 I discuss the economic transformation, in particular the introduction of the Green Revolution. I will deal with the serious consequences of this economic transformation for class and gender relations, especially for poor widows and divorced women. In this context specifically the rise of microfinance programmes and the rise of the dowry system will be discussed. Chapter 4 deals with the socio-cultural context, such as Islam, moral values and gender ideologies, and ongoing processes of social transformation, in particular in women’s mobility, education and family planning. I will argue that contradictory developments have taken place and that there is a decline of the traditional power structure.

Chapters 5 and 6 give the context for an analysis of women’s relationship to land and the impact of women’s land ownership on their position in the household and

7 The real name of the village is Baniapukur, situated in Gangni Thana, Meherpur District. We gave this nickname to the village in 1975 because quarrels, in particular land quarrels, were one of the most striking features of the village to us at that time (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980, see in particular the chapter on endemic land quarrels: p.160-166). Some villagers were not happy with the nickname; they felt that we had put the village to shame, in particular with the chapter on illicit sexual relations. Some of them suggested that I call it ‘Shantipur’ (Peace village) now because there were not many quarrels any more. (But as we will see later there are still major land conflicts.) Other villagers contested this and said the name and the book were good, we had written the truth and it reflected the reality. Some villagers even argued that the village had become famous because of our ‘Jhagrapur book’ and had adopted the name ‘Jhagrapur’ as a name to take pride in. In the 1990s Proshika, a national NGO, used the Jhagrapur book in their training programmes; they had taken efforts and found the village.
the community. Factors that facilitate or constrain women’s de facto empowerment in Jhagrapur are also examined. In chapter 5 survey data will be used to analyse the changes in class and gender relations as they have taken shape in Jhagrapur since 1975, in particular with regard to the class composition, land and labour relations and the rise of the dowry system. In the second part of the chapter I examine the effects of microfinance programmes and dowry and what it has meant in practice for poor women and men in the village.

Chapter 6 provides background to socio-cultural and religious aspects of the position of women in Jhagrapur and how these have changed. I will deal with factors such as Islam, moral values and globalisation as well as changes in education, family planning and the village power structure that have taken place. An example of women working in rice mills will illustrate how poor women are stigmatised in an attempt by the powerful rich to assert their declining authority.

In chapter 7 we come to the question of women’s relationship to land. I will present my research data on women’s land ownership in Jhagrapur and analyse structural factors that enable or constrain women’s acquisition of land and their control over it.

Chapter 8 gives an analysis of what ownership of land means for women’s empowerment and for their position in the various arenas: in conjugal, domestic and kinship relations and in the village power structure.

In chapter 9 I present my overall conclusions on the question whether women’s land ownership contributes to their empowerment and whether land ownership gives women power to challenge and change gender and class inequalities and to contribute to processes of social transformation. Finally, I will reflect on the relevance of the outcome for the theories and practice.
2 Debates on women, land and agency

In order to explore the relationship between women’s land ownership and empowerment and what this means for structural social transformation I will use theories and debates on structure and agency, on women’s land rights and on empowerment. In the next sections I will discuss these debates and elaborate the various issues and concepts that these debates relate to. As land reform can be a way for women to acquire land I will discuss recent debates on land reform and their (ir)relevance for women at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Structure and agency

Since long social scientists and activists have debated the question how processes of change are brought about and what/who are the main agents of change. The debate on structure and agency is part of this larger debate. The role of structure (such as the state, ideologies, culture) and of agency (people’s individual and collective actions) in social change, and the relation of structure and agency to one another is an important issue in the debate. Are structure and agency to be seen as independent or do they depend on each other? In other words, is social change largely the result of structural factors and ‘direction from above’, e.g. laws that are enacted by the state? Or is it the result of ‘action from below’ and can individuals or collectives play a role in bringing about a transformation of society? Or is a combination of both structure and agency essential in bringing about structural changes? Is there a dialectical relationship? In which way does structure facilitate or constrain agency and can agency change structure?

Most contemporary work on the relation between structure and agency is motivated by the need to avoid falling into one of two theoretical camps - Structuralism or Intentionalism (McAnulla 1998). Within Structuralism structures are given primacy and agency is seen as an effect of structure. In contrast, Intentionalists argue that structures only exist as an effect of individual actions and hence the focus is on agency. Debates on strategies to bring about gender equality within the women’s movement have also revolved around the question whether to put emphasis on structure or on agency. For instance through the questions whether it is a more effective strategy to struggle for equal rights to ownership of resources by means of legal reforms or rather via women organising themselves and collectively occupying and controlling resources. The first strategy puts emphasis on structure and is top-down, while the role of agency (by individual or collective actions) is emphasised in the second.

In the initial phases of the second wave feminist movement emphasis was put more on oppressive (patriarchal, capitalist) structures of which women were victims. Since the 1980s, however, there is a greater emphasis on women’s agency - women as actors - and their active role in social change (see e.g. Apter and Garnsey 1994; Adkins 1998; Saptari 2000). It is now commonly recognised that people who are oppressed do not just remain passive victims; their agency should also be acknowledged.

Women act and struggle to survive and challenge unequal structures, individually or collectively. Their actions may eventually lead to an improvement of their situation and to structural changes. In the issue of social transformation, both structure and agency have to be taken into account.

An important theorist in the structure - agency debate is Anthony Giddens. In his ‘structuration’ theory he links structure and agency. Structuration refers to the process of production and reproduction of social relations across time and space. Giddens (1979) distinguishes between structure and system. Systems are defined as “reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organised as regular social practices”. Systems have structural properties, but are not structures in themselves (Giddens 1979: 65-69). He defines structure as “rules and resources, organised as properties of social systems” and adds that structures exist only as “structural properties”. Giddens then states that the structuration of a social system is the way in which that system is produced and reproduced in interaction, through the application of rules and resources. He adds that there is a possibility of unintended outcomes. Giddens further elaborates that both rules and power are integral elements of practices. Rules are not generalisations of general practices - of what people do, but rules generate practices, they are the medium of the production and reproduction of practices. He clarifies this with the example of a child who has learnt to speak her/his own language: (s)he knows the rules, whether or not (s)he can formulate them. Resources are the ‘bases’ or ‘vehicles’ of power. They comprise structures of domination that interacting parties draw upon and in this way reproduce again. Herein lies the duality of structure: “structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems” (Giddens 1979: 69).

Structure and agency are mutually dependent. In other words, structure (rules and resources/power) shapes people’s actions (social practices, relations between actors or collectivities) and society, and in turn structure is reproduced and shaped by these actions. Structuration is then the ways in which the social system is produced and reproduced in interaction. According to Giddens (1979: 70) structure is both enabling and constraining and “the same structural characteristics participate in the subject (the actor) as in the object (society). Structure forms ‘personality’ and ‘society’ simultaneously - but in neither case exhaustively: because of the significance of unintended consequences of action, and because of unacknowledged conditions of action.” Giddens concludes: “Structure thus is not to be conceptualised as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production.” And hence, Giddens argues, there is no need for a conception of de-structuration (as e.g. in Sartre who counterposes structure and freedom), as structure is not only constraining but also enabling.

I believe that we encounter a problem with Giddens’ theory here. Giddens sees individuals as only shaped by structure and their actions as producing and reproducing structure, although these can have unintended consequences. This would mean that

---

9 In the earlier study an entire chapter deals with women’s reactions to oppressive situations. See Arens & van Beurden ([1977] 1980: chapter II-7).
in Giddens’ theory there is no space for conscious rebellion, for individuals or groups to operate knowingly against the structural rules and powers in order to advance a different system with different structural properties and social relations (in Giddens’ terms rules and resources), based on fundamentally different principles. People’s actions are not necessarily exclusively formed or conditioned by social structure, such as society and its ideologies (although certainly to a large extent, they are either in line with these structures or a reaction to it). They are also shaped by other factors that are not necessarily fully determined by the social structure, such as their personality, intelligence, creativity and the skills they have to manipulate or utilise structures to their own (perceived) advantage.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is useful here (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus refers to a person’s dispositions and tacit knowledge, which shape her/his perception and behaviour and so leave more room for individual characteristics which are not only shaped by social structures. This idea leaves room for people’s own original thinking and creative action that transcends the structural conditioning. If people’s practices are solely conditioned by (their position in) the structure, then the logical consequence would be that changes are possible only within the given structure, but that a fundamentally different social structure/society would not be possible. Although the influence of structure is strong and pervasive, I argue that people are not necessarily completely trapped in the structure and that it is possible for individuals or groups to transcend the structural conditioning and act outside of it. Moreover, structures are not monolithic entities but full of internal contradictions and this creates space for people’s own creativity. To carry this thought further, it could be that ideas and actions of people on the margins of society are less trapped in the dominant structures (which are largely determined by the powerful sections of society). Economically they may be trapped in the system and dependent on working for others to survive, but they may be less trapped in the hegemonic ideology and discourse as they are excluded by that ideology. Because of this they may feel freer to act in defiance of, or to ignore those structures. In other words, it could be that marginalised poor people are more inclined to ignore prevailing ideologies and to exert their agency in order to pursue strategies that might upset the power structure and improve their own situation.

Before the above posed questions regarding the role of structure and agency in structural changes can be answered we first have to ask the question what actually is structure and when can we say that structures have changed? In this study we will deal in particular with two major structures – the economic structure and the patriarchal structure. These two structures determine to a large extent the social relations between the classes and the sexes and, interrelated, they influence each other.11

10 Here we touch on deeply philosophical issues related to human nature and the human mind, which cannot be dealt with here.

11 Another important power structure that determines to a large extent the make up of a society is its ethnic structure. However, since the population of Jhagrapur consists only of Bengalis, the ethnic structure does not feature in this study.
The economic structure determines the power relations between socio-economic classes with important elements being the distribution of the means of production and labour relations. The patriarchal structure determines the power relations between the sexes, the gender relations. Important elements here are the gender division of labour and socio-cultural institutions that regulate gender relations, such as marriage, and gendered norms and values. Religion and culture are other important structures that feature in this study. The shape that religion and culture take is largely determined by the economic and gender structures. They are a reflection of existing class and gender relations, but in turn they can modify economic and gender relations. Norms and values, beliefs, rituals, sexual mores and kinship relations are important elements of religion and culture.

Within the structures there are various players; people - men and women, the state, religious leaders, NGOs, foreign governments, international bodies, national and international private institutions, national and international companies, etc. These players are to a large degree shaped by the existing structures but they, in turn, also reproduce or modify these structures. Finally it needs to be pointed out that the above structures may take different shapes in the various arenas with their own spheres of influence, such as the private sphere of the household and the family or the local, national or global public sphere. As the private and public spheres can also have an impact on each other. These dimensions need to be taken into account as well.

All the above elements form the structural context within which women’s relationship to land and empowerment will be investigated and its impact on these structural elements will be analysed. In the next section I will go deeper into several aspects of agency.

2.2 Power relations and women’s agency
Agency and the struggle for gender equality are very much linked to power, in particular to power relations and the power that women have or can claim over their own lives or for women in general. Gender inequalities between women and men in society, also referred to as gender hierarchies, are a reflection of the structure with its gender ideologies and gender relations that determine how much space women have, what options they have to act individually or collectively at the various levels of interaction and how much power they have to negotiate influence and transform society. A patriarchal society is based on the idea that men are superior and are the providers and that women are the dependents and need protection. This has consequences for the patterns of interaction between women and men; men feel superior and tend to dominate and subordinate women. Women’s position in a patriarchal society is essentially different from men’s position due to existing gender hierarchies. Within the social structure men and women interact with each other in various power relations, such as in conjugal relations (marriage), in domestic relations (the household), in kinship relations (her marital family and her natal family), her neighbourhood, the village community and the larger society. As White (1992:
140) has correctly stated: “Women are defined by their relationships.” Unlike men, women in Bangladesh are usually addressed and referred to as so-and-so’s mother, so-and-so’s wife, or so-and-so’s daughter, etc., instead of by their names.

Women have different positions and identities in the various arenas, as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, daughters in law, mothers in law, inhabitants of the village and the country, etc. (Plate 3). These various arenas of interaction represent different dimensions of power relations. In each of these positions a woman’s power and her interests are different and these may be conflicting with each other. Each identity also brings about different emotions. A woman’s relationship with her husband is different from her relationship with her father or her brothers and these relationships are again different from her position in the neighbourhood or the village. Each identity determines to a large extent the space that a person has to act and therefore a woman’s power and her possibilities to negotiate are also different in each of these arenas. For instance as a wife a woman may feel dependent and insecure and therefore be more inclined to opt for her husband’s interest rather than her own, while as a mother she may feel stronger as she may want to act in the interest of her children out of love for them. As a mother in law who has power over her daughters in law she may feel confident and powerful and act more in her own interest or her sons interest. Hence, there are also generational differences and because these various relations have different dynamics it is important to examine women’s position in these different arenas when dealing with structural factors that enable or constrain women’s agency in the transformation of social relations. At the same time power relations in the
various arenas cannot be seen as completely separate from each other as, on the contrary, they influence each other.

Similarly, the public and the private sphere impact each other and have no sharp boundaries. Social norms and values regarding women’s behaviour, the dominant gender ideology, laws and public policies, all have an impact on how women are seen and treated in the private sphere of the household and the family. Prevailing gender norms in the community are also enforced in the private sphere of the household. At the same time, dynamics in the private sphere can have influence on the community. Massive women’s discontent and revolt in the household against certain norms and values may lead to structural changes in gender relations in the whole community or at wider levels in society. As feminists have pointed out since the late 1960s. “The personal is political.” Therefore a person’s structural positioning and the power that he or she has in existing power structures should always be taken into account as well (Saptari 2000:19), not only in gender relations but also when it comes to class relations, ethnic relations, and other hierarchical relations. For instance women across all classes may have the same interests within gender relations, but their class interests may be different. Women of the dominant classes may not necessarily choose for their gender interests in their relation to poor women but may choose for their class interests which are most likely different from the class interest of poor women. Women may be inclined to defend their class interests, but at the same time challenge their gender position.

**Agency as a mechanism to reinforce structure**

The question regarding agency is not only in which ways and to what extent persons can challenge and change the structure through individual and collective actions. The question is also what and how much influence does structure have on agency, on the choices made and on the position of a person in the structure. In other words, how much is women’s agency determined by existing power structures with their norms, rules and laws that are embedded in a certain ideology? Agency can serve to change the structure, but it can also serve to reproduce existing structures and maintain the status quo. Especially people belonging to the dominant sections of society perceive it in their interest to maintain existing structures and are therefore more inclined to exert their agency in order to preserve the status quo. But people’s agency may also reinforce structure because they have been conditioned by social norms that are part of the structure - e.g. through socialisation and the patriarchal gender ideology. These people have then internalised oppressive norms and ideology. In an article dealing with the issue of structure and agency Apter and Garnsey (1994:27) point to the interconnections between structure and agency and bring up the importance of subjective experience. They point to the mechanism of women complying with prevailing patriarchal norms because they perceive it in their own or their daughter’s best interest. They “try to protect their daughters from within the endangering patriarchal structure” As an example they refer to the Chinese practice of foot-binding.
where a mother may break the daughter’s foot arches herself and bind them so as to ensure a good husband for her. They comment:

The mother who believes that her daughter needs a good husband to avoid these ills [penury, prostitution, slavery] and that a good husband will only be had by a foot bound daughter, puts her daughter through this suffering for what she sees as her daughter’s good, even without direct pressure from the men. The foot binding practice, so often perceived as male power inflicted on women, is here shown as a practice in which women exacerbate constraints of structure in their attempts to protect against the worst effects.

The above illustrates the complex nature of the concept of agency. Agency does not necessarily serve to bring about change; it can also reinforce a structure as in the above example. By exerting her agency the mother, keeping the structure in tact, reinforces the cultural notion that foot binding is necessary to have a good marriage and that unmarried women face the danger of prostitution or slavery. The mother uses structure to assert her agency. Caught up in the culture of foot binding, the mother perceives a bad marriage or no marriage at all as a worse fate for her daughter than crippling her. Apter and Garnsey (1994: 27) conclude that a complete change in mind-set may be required to enable women to see their role in sustaining these structural constraints, and hence their power to change them.

As in the example above, women may feel stronger if they choose to comply with existing gender norms and ideology. It is expected from women in patriarchal society that they marry and women may fear that going against social norms and values will cause greater damage than if they have a bad marriage. In such conditions, breaking out of a bad marriage may generate more negative consequences than staying in, even with a violent husband.

The relationship between structure and agency is not one-dimensional because actors have different positions in the various structures and other dispositions of persons may differ as well. Moreover, certain structural factors related to gender relations or class relation facilitate women’s agency, while others constrain agency. The impact, however, may not be the same on all women. Stoler (1979) found that changes in the economic rural structure in Indonesia with its complex harvesting system, led to a greater class differentiation between women instead of a greater differentiation between men and women. Stoler connected this to existing class differences in women’s income earning which related to differences in land ownership. Getting hired for harvesting paddy (a job done by women in Indonesia) was the highest source of income for poor peasant women and they were dependent on larger landholding households for this. On the other hand, women from landholding households were the ones who hired labourers for harvesting and could mobilise more labourers as they accumulated more land. At the same time they could concentrate on trading activities, which gave them much higher returns than
they could earn from harvesting. Saptari (2000: 19,20) has pointed out that scholars often avoid analysing what the term ‘agency’ implies for a person’s structural positioning. “The focus is more on what it means for an individual’s subjective experience…” without “…reference to the implication of such activities for the person’s longer term well-being and social position.” Agency is then used only at the individual level, indicating how an individual’s action has affected her/his position, without analysing implications at the structural level for the power structure, i.e. how the power structure itself has been affected. The latter is certainly more difficult, but cannot be avoided when dealing with questions regarding social change as it is a fundamental question in the structure-agency debate.

2.3 The concepts of agency and empowerment
Both the concepts of agency and empowerment connect to a condition of a person or a group of persons in which they act to get more control over their own lives. The concept of empowerment is used extensively in the development literature and is often mentioned as an important objective of development programmes and policies, in particular with regard to women. The feminist organisation DAWN was among the first to use the term ‘empowerment’ in relation to women’s struggle for equality. They conceptualised empowerment in the following way:

We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country and from the relationships among countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop his or her full potential and creativity and women’s values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships. …only by sharpening the links between equality, development and peace, can we show that the “basic rights” of the poor and the transformation of the institutions that subordinate women are inextricably linked. They can be achieved together through the self-empowerment [my emphasis] of women (DAWN 1985: 173-175).

DAWN used the term ‘self-empowerment’ to indicate a process in which women collectively increase their own internal strength with the aim to break down structures of inequality. Their long-term strategies included national liberation from colonial and neo-colonial domination, shifts from export-led strategies in agriculture to self-reliance and greater control over the activities of multinational companies. Simultaneously, short-term strategies were to provide ways of responding to current crises that women faced, e.g. by helping women in food production (DAWN 1985; Moser 1989: 1815, 1816). Thus, in the DAWN concept of empowerment

---

12 The Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives as the second meaning of agency “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power”. The meaning of empowerment is given as “to promote the self-actualization or influence of”.

13 Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) was launched in a meeting in India in 1984 where it was decided to produce a paper with their common views on women and development. The resulting document was presented at the 1985 UN World Conference of Women in Nairobi.
the aspect of structural transformation was included; empowerment was seen as an important element in the struggle for structural change of power structures, regarding class, gender and race relations.

Due to the attractiveness of the term ‘empowerment’ with its “language of promise” suggesting a process of getting power, of “power to the people” (Staudt 2002) and of change the term has been used in many different ways by a wide variety of actors from grassroots activists and organisations to established development institutions like the World Bank and governments. As a result the concept has gradually lost its original meaning. ‘Empowerment has been largely hijacked by mainstream development institutions, some of them actively promoting neo-liberal policies14 (Parpart 2002; Staudt 2002). Clarity on questions such as “what kind of power?” and “power for what?” have largely disappeared, whereas these questions are an essential part of empowerment as it was originally conceptualised. Often empowerment is not clearly defined and conveniently the aspect of structural transformation has been turned into individual transformation or left out altogether. This omission results in a vagueness that serves a diverse variety of interests, not in the last place the interests of existing power structures. Another problem with the term ‘empowerment’ is that it does not necessarily imply a process of self-empowerment. This is problematic because it could also be interpreted as power that needs to be given by other people. Such an approach implies a form of patronising and arrogance, of approaching the ‘targeted’ people not as equal partners but as subjects. Self-empowerment on the contrary refers to a struggle of self taking power to come out of the subjugated position in existing power structures in which people have been stripped of their power. My resentment to use the term ‘empowerment’ lies in its vagueness and the way it has been hijacked by neo-liberal forces, robbing it from the meaning that the DAWN women originally gave to it. For that reason the term ‘agency’ would be preferable. However, the concepts of agency and empowerment are not completely synonymous. Empowerment implies a process, which agency does not; the process of gaining strength to take power/control is not included in the concept of agency. Then what to do, which term to use? How have other scholars dealt with the terms agency and empowerment?

In order to obtain more clarity about the relation between empowerment and agency Bartlett (2008: 525-528) refers to the discourses on intrinsic empowerment and instrumental empowerment. This is a helpful distinction. In the first empowered people take control of their own agenda while in the second people are given a

---

14 The attractiveness of the term for neo-liberal institutions is e.g. demonstrated by the fact that empowerment was adopted by the World Bank as one of the three pillars of poverty reduction in 2000 and by 2005 ‘empowerment’ was mentioned in the documentation of over 1,800 World Bank-aided projects (Alsop, Ruth and Nina Heinsohn 2005). Alsop and Heinsohn defined empowerment in the World Bank policy research paper as “enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”, reproducing the vagueness of the term by defining the outcome as “desired” while not mentioning by whom and for what?
greater role in the agenda of others, e.g. development institutions (Bartlett 2008: 528). Bartlett states that at the root of the distinction is the concept of ‘agency’, a crucial component of empowerment. In fact agency is the action component of empowerment; it means taking power and what a person actually does with the acquired power. Bartlett (2008: 527) also states that only when a process is self-directed empowerment is taking place. This would then thus be intrinsic empowerment and corresponds to the concept of self-empowerment as meant by the DAWN women. When using the term empowerment it is thus necessary to use a more specified term as without any further specification ‘empowerment’ can have a wide variety of meanings. Let us see what other elements would be important in a further specification of empowerment.

Similarly to the DAWN women, several other scholars have emphasised the structural aspects of empowerment (Agarwal 1994; Sen & Batliwala 2000; Deere & Léon 2001; Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002). In her definition, Agarwal explicitly relates empowerment to a process that enhances the ability of people in subordinate positions “to challenge and change (in their favour) existing power relationships”. She further states that empowerment “can manifest itself in acts of individual resistance as well as in group mobilisation” (Agarwal 1994: 39). Batliwala (1994) specifies explicitly that empowerment includes both control over resources and over ideology and also means an inner transformation that gives strength to overcome barriers to accessing resources or changing ideology. Thus, Agarwal and Batliwala both emphasise the process and the desired structural outcome of the process in their concept of empowerment.

Deere and Léon include two other important elements, the contextual and collective aspect. They argue that the context, history, and “location of subordination in the personal, familiar, communal, and higher levels” shape empowerment (Deere & Léon 2001: 23-25); they should therefore be taken into account as well. For the collective aspect they refer to the concept of ‘power with’, a concept introduced by Jo Rowland. ‘Power with’ (which is very different from ‘power over’) is a shared power and becomes “apparent when a group generates a collective solution to a common problem” (Deere & Léon 2001: 23-25). ‘Power with’ is another important element of empowerment in the struggle for structural changes in the power structure, both with regard to class relations and gender relations. In addition, Agarwal (1994, 2003a) also emphasises the importance of collectivity in the struggle for land rights.

Finally, Mohanty (1991: 71) warns against defining relations of domination and exploitation in binary terms by seeing women as a homogenous “powerless” group.

15 In fact we encounter the same problem here with the term ‘empowerment’ as with the term ‘conscientisation’, a buzzword in the 1960s and 1970s that often betrayed a top-down thinking as well. It was often argued that people would only need to be made conscious of oppressive power structures and then they would start resisting these. In fact people are often very aware of existing power structures, but the problem is that they lack the means to act differently. In the absence of proper means they have good reasons not to resist in order to minimise the oppression of unequal power relations.
If the struggle for a just society is seen in terms of the move from powerless to powerful for women as a group, then the new society would be structurally identical to the existing organization of power relations, constituting itself as a simple inversion of what exists. But women as a group are not in some sense essentially superior or infallible. The crux of the problem lies in the initial assumption of women as a homogenous group or category ("the oppressed").

Thus, in the struggle for a just society, it is important to distinguish between women (and men) according to backgrounds and circumstances, such as class and ethnic background, marital status, and so on. In a just society, power would be equally divided between all the different groups and would be ‘power with’ and ‘power to’, while ‘power over’ would stop to exist.

Summarising the above, the following elements are essential in the concept of empowerment if we are concerned with social change: empowerment as an intrinsic process within the self, shaped by the context, which finds its expression in a struggle that, if persistently and collectively engaged in, will eventually lead to a structural transformation of unequal and unjust power structures. Most of these elements have been lost in programmes and policies initiated and implemented by mainstream forces. I argue that we as feminists and scholars have to reclaim the term ‘empowerment’ and restore its originally intended meaning. Maybe we should start using a more qualified term such as ‘collective self-empowerment’, or ‘collective self-empowerment for structural equality’ to make the process and desired outcome more explicit. Throughout this study, I will emphasise the structural transformation aspect of empowerment and make it explicit wherever necessary. Where I think it more appropriate, I will use the word agency.

### 2.4 Assessment of women’s agency/empowerment

If we want to examine the question whether women’s land ownership leads to their empowerment, then another important question is how to assess empowerment/agency. Most articles on this subject deal with indirect measurement through indicators such as education, income, access to resources, and participation in the labour force, or with the various statistical dimensions of the measurement of indicators through surveys (Alsop and Heinsohn 2005; Agarwala and Lynch 2006). However, empirical evidence from human and gender development indicators has shown that, despite improvement in education, income, access to resources and credit, women’s position with regard to health, decision-making power, employment, and rights has not improved significantly (Pradhan 2003; Obaid 2002). This outcome clearly points to the inadequacy of these conventional measures of empowerment. It is not surprising that it is not possible to measure empowerment by applying a checklist of indicators as empowerment is a gradual process.

If empowerment is conceptualised as a process towards structural transformation, then an assessment of empowerment would need to take into account the elements
of empowerment that have been discussed in the previous section. Kabeer (1999) has approached the issue of measurement of empowerment in a more theoretical way and comes close to incorporating these elements. She relates empowerment to "the ability to make choices" and deconstructs empowerment - the ability to exercise choice - into three dimensions: resources - economic, human and social (pre-conditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes). She then argues that the measurement of empowerment should consist of the measurement of all three (Kabeer 1999: 443, 444). To incorporate the structural dimensions of individual choice, Kabeer suggests that the given structural conditions under which choices are made (availability of choice) as well as the consequences of choice (strategic life choices, such as livelihood, marriage, or second-order choices) should be taken into account. The latter would indicate the extent to which the choices made have the potential to transform the former, the structural conditions. Kabeer also rightly argues that resources are a measure of potential only; they do not necessarily give women a greater degree of empowerment. She clarifies this with the example of land as a resource. In the debate on land rights for women, it is often assumed that land rights give women a greater degree of autonomy, but this is not necessarily the case. Kabeer argues:

> If choice is to be useful as a measure of empowerment, the ‘resource’ dimension has to be defined in ways which spell out the potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple ‘access’ indicators generally do” (Kabeer 1999: 444).

This is a rather complicated way to say that to take choice as a measure of empowerment, one should not just look at access to resources (pre-condition), but also at what the person who has access to resources can do (agency potential, process) with these and, finally, whether their action will give a desirable result (outcome, valued achievement). Translated to the issue of women’s land ownership, this would mean that not only ownership (access to resources), but simultaneously control (agency) over the land and over its produce (outcome) is essential. This is in agreement with my findings, as we will see later. Control is essential; it will enable women to make their own choices and use their land in their own interest or in the collective interest of a group of persons of their own choice and in this way contribute to structural changes.

Not only the ability to chose, but also the availability of choice (in Kabeer’s terms the conditions of choice) and the outcome of the choices made are important aspects of the assessment of empowerment. Most poor peasant women hardly have any choices at all, but in relation to land ownership, if their parents own some land, women do have a choice to some extent. In theory, they have the choice to claim their share of the inheritance or not, whether to give it in sharecrop to their brothers, or to make other arrangements for cultivation, etc. However, a woman’s decision on what she choses, both the process and the outcome, is only partly determined by her agency, by how much power she has to negotiate with her
brothers and make her own choices. Apart from women’s agency, the decision is also determined by the gendered social structure with its patriarchal norm that women depend on men for their livelihood and e.g. that a family prefers to keep its ancestral lands in tact (which may limit her freedom of choice). Besides these, the decision is determined by the class structure and other factors, such as a woman’s own personality, her family background, and education. The social structure can constrain or enable a woman’s agency, her freedom of choice. For example, if a woman has a bad marriage she may give more importance to a good relationship with her brothers, so that she can return to her natal family in case her marriage fails. In such a scenario, she may be more inclined to comply with the choice of her brothers, even though her own free choice would have been different. Similarly, if she has a good stable marriage she may feel confident to challenge her brothers and claim her rightful share. In other words, constraining and enabling factors of the social structure and how the constraining factors are challenged, need to be taken into account when assessing agency/empowerment processes and their contribution to social change. Most women who have no adult male to provide for their survival and protection have no choice but to ignore prevailing gender and class norms and take on these men’s tasks. By doing this, they become in the first place the agents of change in the process of structural transformation. Forced by circumstances, these women create their own space to act outside the given structural constraints of existing gender and class relations.

Contributing to structural changes not only means making choices, it also means taking risks to overcome constraints. Taking risk is an important part of the empowerment process that is missing in Kabeer’s argument. The question to what extent women are prepared to take risks, is an important aspect of opting for strategic choices that challenge structural inequalities. The bigger the risk and the more is at stake, the less prepared women will be to take the risk. How big the risk is again depends on the economic, socio-cultural, and individual circumstances, such as personal social relations and the characters of the people involved. Taking collective action can considerably reduce the risks involved and, if this is a process of sustained struggle, it has more chance to lead to structural changes in the long run. Collectivity is a precondition for achieving structural results.

Choice is often translated into decision-making power, and decision-making power in the household has been used as one of the main indicators of women’s agency or empowerment (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1999; Oppenheim Mason and Smith 2003). Kabeer (1999: 438) correctly stated that, apart from decision-making, agency “can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis.” I will deal mainly with agency in the form of decision-making and negotiating power, but I will also give some examples of resistance against gender inequality. The household is mostly studied as the main arena in which women exercise agency as for most women this is their most important space for social interaction. Using a bargaining approach, Agarwal (1994) conceptualised
the household as a “complex matrix of relationships” of multiple actors often with conflicting interests and differential abilities to pursue those interests (Plate 4). Intra household interactions contain elements of both cooperation and conflict and negotiations are “subject to the constraints set by gender, age, type of relationship and undisputed tradition.” The outcome of the negotiation depends on the bargaining power of the household members which is defined in particular by the strength of the person’s fall-back position (the options that the person has outside the household in case cooperation ceases) and by the degree to which her/his claim is seen as legitimate (Agarwal 1994: 54). Agarwal (1994: 62) lists five factors on which a woman’s fall-back position depends: 1. private ownership and control over assets, 2. access to employment or other means of income, 3. access to communal resources, 4. access to traditional external social support systems, and 5. access to support from the state or NGOs. Each of these different factors needs to be taken into account when assessing a person’s fall-back position. Other important factors with regard to decision-making are the structural constraints of the hegemonic gender ideology and gender inequalities that restrict women’s decision-making and bargaining power in the various arenas of interaction, such as in the natal family and the community.

An important question in relation to decision-making is: if women have the power to influence or make decisions, then how do they utilise their decision-making power, what choices do they opt for? Do they make a choice in their own interest, or in the interest of the household, their children, the family or the community? And why do women make the choices that they make, what does it mean for them? Choices made do not necessarily empower women. Above, we have seen the example of a Chinese woman who binds her daughter’s feet as she perceives
it “in the daughter’s best interest” to ensure a good husband for her reinforcing the gender oppressive structure. In her study on intra-household power relations among garment workers, Kabeer (1997: 198) refers to Amartya Sen’s concept of ‘perceived interest response’ and points out that the “patriarchal bargain” in Bangladesh requires women to rely on male protection and provision. Therefore, women often make choices that conform to prevailing gender norms and ideology as their ‘perceived interests’ are “bound up with male protection within the household and therefore the stake that women have in the continued stability of the household.” In other words, women often use their agency to reinforce structure but they can also use their agency for more indirect non-confronting ways of challenging power structures. Kabeer (1997: 298) concludes:

Given the resilience of the broader structures of patriarchal constraint within which women’s lives are played out, and the risks and dependencies it generates for them, women’s search for greater control over their own lives is unlikely to take the form of direct challenge to male authority within the household or of open conflict over intra-household allocation, rather it is more likely to operate through frequently hidden expansion of possibilities and potentials, through the quiet renegotiations of their fall-back position.

Agarwal (1994) also refers to Sen’s concepts of ‘perceived interest response’ and ‘perceived contribution response’ (contribution to the household) as factors in the outcome of a bargaining process. She agrees with Sen that the outcome of the bargaining will be less favourable if the value attached to a person’s own interest/well-being is perceived as less than the well-being of others (as often in the case of women) and if the person’s contribution to the household economy is perceived as smaller. Sen attributes this to women’s ‘false consciousness’, but Agarwal contests Sen’s argument and rightly points out that women’s decisions in favour of maximum family welfare above her own welfare are not a matter of women’s ‘false consciousness’. Women’s covert forms of resistance to gender inequalities indicate that they are conscious about these inequalities. Rather, women’s decisions reflect their perceived long-term self-interest in the context of women’s dependency on the family for their survival and of the external constraints for women to act in their own interests. Agarwal argues:

The appropriate conclusion would then be not so much that women need to realize that they deserve better, but that they need to believe that they can get a better deal, and to know how that would be possible” (Agarwal 1994: 57).

In other words, these women do not have a ‘false consciousness’, but rather they are conscious of the social realities and their choices reflect the best deal they can get in these given realities. Thus when a woman makes a choice in the interest of other family members, this does not necessarily mean an altruistic choice against
her own interest. A woman’s own interest may be served by the choice in the long run, or at least that is how it is perceived by the woman in question. Given this potential of agency to strengthen rather than change oppressive structures, the presence of elements of transformation of these structures is a key issue in the assessment of agency/empowerment.

Finally, violence, or rather the absence of violence, has also been used as an indicator in the assessment of agency/empowerment. This will be discussed in the next section.

**Male violence and empowerment**

In a patriarchal society, violence, or the threat of violence, is the most common way for men to assert their authority and control over women. By beating their wives, daughters or sisters, or threatening to do so, men assert their masculinity and male superiority and set and enforce societal norms regarding proper women’s behaviour. Male violence against women, or rather the absence of male violence, has been used as an indicator of agency/empowerment. The assumption here would be that men act less violently against women if they take control and assert their agency than against women who remain passive. Connecting this to the questions concerning land ownership and empowerment posed in this study, it could be suggested that women who take control of their own land would face less violence than women who do not.

Scholars have disagreed about the effect of variables such as women’s economic empowerment, age, and education on male violence (Schuler & Islam 2008; Vyas & Watts 2008). The question is can (absence of) male violence really be taken as a measurement of women’s empowerment? Or is violence more an indicator of men asserting their masculine identity as male authority and/or misogyny? The latter is the conclusion of Visaria (2008) in her study on domestic violence in India:

...empowerment has no clear relationship to prevalence of violence. This belies the expectation that women who participate in household decisions, and therefore have egalitarian gender-role attitudes, are less likely to experience violence.

Visaria analysed answers of female and male respondents to questions related to domestic violence included in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) that was conducted in India in 2005-06. In her study, she examined findings on three issues: 1. the degree of marital control exercised by husbands and other empowerment indicators of women and their relationship to violence, 2. the association between knowledge of parental violence, the experience and acceptance of spousal violence, and 3. the extent to which women seek or expect to receive help to stop spousal violence. Visaria correlated these data with data on women’s empowerment. She measured empowerment as a degree of women’s participation in decision-making in the household related to their own health, major household purchases, purchases for daily household needs, and on visits to their
family and relatives. Rather than being related to women’s empowerment, Visaria found that violence is related to controlling behaviour of men and societal norms regarding women’s behaviour, perceptions about their worth and position in the household, and men’s notions of self-esteem that influence husbands’ behaviour, for better or worse. Her findings also indicate how deeply women have internalised patriarchal norms. As much as 54% of the women and 51% of the men agreed that wife-beating was justified in at least one of the situations regarding domestic violence that were presented to them in the survey. She concludes:

It suggests that there is good agreement between men and women on the norms that govern married life and that if women fail to observe the norms they would bring violence upon themselves (Visaria 2008).

With regard to the relationship between land ownership and male violence, a recent World Bank study on gender in Bangladesh (Das 2008: 100, 6.41-44) did not find any significance of land ownership in relation to violence in their analysis from the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2004. Other studies (Koenig et.al. 2003; Hadi 2005)16 found that household (not women’s) land ownership protects women against violence. Neither the World Bank report, nor the other studies mentioned made a distinction between land owned by men and land owned by women. The World Bank study acknowledged: “…there is a difference between household ownership of land and a woman’s ownership of land”. Despite this the World Bank mentioned in a footnote that the issue of land ownership was dropped in their World Bank Survey on Gender Norms 2006. So instead of including gender segregated data on land ownership in their future research, the World Bank dropped the issue of land ownership altogether. Obviously the World Bank gives no importance to gender and land issues. In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, Panda and Agarwal (2005: 823) found in a study in Kerala, India that women’s independent ownership of land or a house “can substantially reduce the risk of both physical and psychological violence.” They found that such women faced less violence. Control may be an important factor here. Women who own a house are likely to have control over their house as they live in it and take care of it, whereas it may be more difficult to have control over a piece of land, which they cannot cultivate all by themselves. Although I did not study male violence systematically, I have come across several instances of male violence against women (see Chapter 6) and have examined whether these instances concerned women who owned land or who did not.

In short, as we have seen so far, agency/empowerment relates to the ability to choose. In the measurement of empowerment three dimensions need to be taken

---

into account: resources (pre-conditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes). All three are essential parts of empowerment. Choice has been mostly translated into decision-making as an indicator of agency/empowerment and sometimes open or hidden resistance is also used as indicator. Apart from this it is also important to assess the outcome of choice. Thus, for what purpose and in whose interest has the choice been made? The usefulness of these indicators will be explored, as well as the structural factors that play a role in the empowerment process and the outcome in terms of structural transformation.

2.5 Women’s land rights and gender equality

Feminist scholars and activists have pointed out that women’s low socio-economic status can be largely attributed to the gender imbalance in the distribution of productive resources and a denial of women’s active role in the production process (Beneria & Sen 1981; Mies 1987; Kishwar 1982, 1989; Clark 1993; Agarwal 1994; Deere & Léon 2001; Patel 2002). Especially since the 1990s, growing importance has been given to women’s land rights. Feminists and scholars, in particular in the South, have started advocating land rights for women and internationally there is a growing awareness that land rights for women are an important factor in improving the position of women. That women have been increasingly demanding land rights is also clear from the fact that one of the points of action in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the World Conference on Women in 1995 was: “Undertake legislation and administrative reforms to give women equal rights with men to economic resources, including access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, credit, inheritance, natural resources and appropriate new technology.”

Although women’s equal rights to resources, laid down in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), has gone into effect in 1981, obviously this has not been enough; more concrete measures are needed to enforce these articles. The growing awareness of the importance of women’s equal rights to land is also reflected in the increasing number of publications dealing with the issue during the last decade (Gouthami & Rajgor 2008; Pena, Maiques & Castillo 2008; Deere & Doss 2006; Nitya Rao 2006; Lastarria-Cornhiel & García-Frias 2005; Kishwar 2005; Jacobs 2004, 2001, 1996; Walker 2003; Kandiyoti 2003; Jackson 2003; Patel 2002; Brown & Das Chowdhury 2002; Quisumbing & De la Brière 2000; Deere & Léon 2001; Cummings, van Dam, Khadar & Valk 2001; Arun 1999; Kevane & Gray 1999; Indra & Buchignani 1997). In contrast to studies in other countries, the literature on Bangladesh that has appeared since the 1970s deals largely with social change related to poverty issues and/or women’s issues. Only few studies deal with

17 This is Strategic objective F.1. under Women and the Economy of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/economy.htm.
18 CEDAW went into effect in 1981. See in particular Article 14(g) and 16(h) of CEDAW.
19 See e.g. the studies of Atiur Rahman 1986, P.K. Md. Motiur Rahman 1994, Ullah 1996; these studies deal with poverty issues. The studies of Rozario 1992, Kotalová 1993 and Kabeer 1997 deal with women’s issues. There are a few village restudies in Bangladesh, I know of only three: Quadir 1960, van Schendel 1981 and Adnan 1997, but these studies do not mention gender issues in relation to land at all.
the issue of women and land (B.K. Jahangir 1987; Rahman & Van Schendel 1997; Sarwar, Islam & Monzoor 2007). The studies on women by White (1992), Rahman Khan (1992) and Gardner (1995) are much broader but include sections on women and land.

In contrast to the limited attention given by scholars to the issue, for a few NGOs and landless peasant organisations, such as Nijera Kori, the Khrishok Federation and its women’s wing the Khisani Saba, women’s ownership of land has been a major issue since many years (Plate 5). The activities of these organisations focus on poor peasant men and women’s right to land, in particular *khas* land (fallow government land) (Kabeer 2002). A detailed study on the impact of their work on the position of women would be an interesting topic for another study.

Agarwal (1994) has examined the relation between women’s land rights and their empowerment, both from studies on various South Asian countries and her own experiences. More than a job or a business, land ownership can give women livelihood security as land is the main means of production. Agarwal argues that land rights can function “as an indicator of women’s economic empowerment and as a facilitator in challenging gender inequities in other (e.g. political and social) areas” (1994: 39) and has more strategic importance than e.g. employment and education (1994: 44). Jackson (2003a,b) disputes Agarwal’s argument that women’s land rights have such a transforming potential for gender relations. Jackson argues that advocacy for land rights and land rights policies need to be contextualised because land claims made within marriage and kin relations are more complex and

---

**Plate 5** Nijera Kori landless women’s group in Noakhali District in 1985.

---

20 Other feminist scholars have also stressed the importance of women’s ownership of resources in analysing the position of women and in programmes, rather than a focus on employment opportunities for women. See e.g. Beneria & Sen (1981), Maria Mies (1987), Sarah White (1992), Alice Clark (1993), Naila Kabeer (1994).
contradictory. Women’s and men’s interests within the household are not necessarily always conflicting. Jackson argues that intra-household relations need to be differentiated as they are complex and can be experienced by women not only as obstacles and constraints but also as supportive.

Agarwal’s argument that women who own land would be in a better position to challenge and change gender inequalities appears to contradict my earlier suggestion that poor landless people may be in a better position to challenge existing unequal structures as they are marginalised and have nothing to lose and can therefore ignore social norms and values. However, Agarwal also emphasised that women’s collective struggle for land could be the most important source of empowerment and that it requires simultaneous struggles for equal access to economic, political and social power.

…The very breadth and depth of the obstacles make land rights a critical entry point for challenging unequal gender relations and power structures at many levels. The struggle for land is thus important in terms of not just the end result, but the very process necessary for the realization of that result, which can be (and indeed would need to be) one of women’s empowerment at multiple levels along the way (Agarwal 1994: 477).

Thus, Agarwal argues that the struggle for land rights and land ownership empowers women and that they, through this struggle, bring about changes in gender relations, both in their individual lives and in patriarchal structures. Assuming that landless peasant men and women would be most interested in obtaining land, this would put them in the forefront of the struggle. This will be investigated.

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of land rights for women and legal instruments that lay down these rights, in practice, women do not necessarily own land. While policies to enforce these rights are essential and women may have the right to own and inherit land by law, many women do not own land. For instance, Deere & Léon (2001) have documented women’s achievements in the 20th century with regard to land rights and ownership in 12 countries in Latin America, and demonstrated that the discrepancy between land rights and actual ownership and control remains substantial. They found that the distribution of land between men and women in the countries they studied is still very unequal, despite women’s formal equality before the law since long, and despite clear gains made by the women’s movement. Deere & Léon argue that this is primarily due to continuing male privilege in inheritance and in the family, as well as in state programs of land distribution, titling and land markets. This is also the case in Bangladesh where inheritance is the most important means for women to obtain land.

---

21 I deal only with Muslim women in this thesis. Except one Hindu family the population in Jhagrapur is Muslim. It is also important to realise that inheritance laws are not uniform in the whole Islamic world. For instance in Indonesia, according to government law, women have the right to an equal inheritance share, thus overruling Islamic inheritance laws.
Following Islamic inheritance laws, Muslim women have the right to inherit and own land, however, they do not get an equal share. Besides, the law lacks enforcement because social norms and gender ideology interfere with these rights, such as the social norm that women in Bangladesh are dependent on their father, husband or sons for their maintenance. Moreover, various studies on women (including the earlier Jhagrapur study), following Jahan (1973), have indicated that, in practice, many women forgo their paternal inheritance share in favour of their brothers in order to keep a good relation with them (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980:53; Hartmann & Boyce 1983:92/93; White 1992:131; Kabeer 1994:153/154, 1999:443, 444; Agarwal 1994:260-8, 2003:204. Rahman & Van Schendel 1997: 245, 255-257). It is also argued that women are denied control over their inheritance share due to the desire to control ancestral property in the paternal lineage and that in “living law” (as opposed to formal law) women are not entitled to land, but only to maintenance. Agarwal (1994: 260-268) has argued that the fact that women renounce their inheritance share can only be understood in the context of the overall situation of these women: early arranged marriages, patrilocal residence, vulnerability in case of marital discord and strong emotional ties with brothers. This is often the case all over South Asia. Agarwal’s suggestion that village exogamy might be a factor in women’s inheritance could be related to Rahman & Van Schendel’s argument of the importance given to maintaining control over ancestral property. Agarwal (1994:291) has further hypothesised that whether women are successful in obtaining their inheritance share or not depends especially on purdah norms, village exogamy, control over female sexuality, class background, and level of education. The extent of a woman’s economic vulnerability is another hypothetical factor, but it could either cause a woman to renounce her claim because she does not have the financial means to exercise her rights, or it could make her demand her share (Agarwal 1994:291).

Against the background of these contradictory findings I have examined present day inheritance practices in Jhagrapur and compared these to my 1975 data. Various dimensions and factors that enable or constrain women’s ownership of land and empowerment have been examined as well. As we will see in Chapters 7 and 8, my findings indicate that there is not necessarily a one-dimensional relation between women’s land ownership and empowerment/agency, but that it depends on other conditions as well. I argue that control over land is even more important for women than ownership and that only under certain conditions may women’s ownership in Bangladesh facilitate women’s empowerment and play a role in challenging and changing gender and class inequalities.

2.6 Women’s control over land

Laws regarding women’s property rights have been enacted in Bangladesh and land can be registered in a woman’s name. Most women obtain land through inheritance, but in practice land is to a large extent in male hands. Apart from the issue of equal rights to land, an even more important aspect of women’s ownership of land is the issue of control. Control is closely connected to agency. Three principal
dimensions of control over land are: 1) women’s ability to acquire and retain the title to the land, 2) to take decisions about the disposal of the land through sale, mortgage or gift, and 3) to take decisions about the use of the land and its produce, including leasing out and self-management of the land (Agarwal 1994: 292). Agarwal elaborates and clarifies these points with numerous examples drawn from other studies (many from Bangladesh). Giving an example of a successful programme in India, Agarwal has also suggested that a practical way for women to facilitate their control over land is to lease or buy land collectively and to manage its cultivation collectively. In that case women would not need to deal with labourers and inputs individually and they stand stronger together. Moreover, as Agarwal also argued, agricultural extension work and trainings should be provided to women and such initiatives may need to be shaped differently for women than for men. An important difference between India and Bangladesh is that women in India, contrary to Bangladesh, do work on the land. They are involved in all agricultural operations except ploughing which is a men’s job. This may have implications for the character of collective land management. Nevertheless, these possibilities should be studied further for Bangladesh. There have been initiatives in this direction in a few areas in Bangladesh by some NGOs, among others by BRAC and Nijera Kori. But as far as I know, there have not been any studies on these initiatives and most of the initiatives have been abandoned. Nijera Kori workers in Gangni told me in 2008 that there had been a women’s group in the neighbouring Kushtha district that had leased land and cultivated it collectively, but this had not been very successful because of the high cost of land lease and inputs. The profits had been very small and therefore the initiative had been abandoned again. I have not been able to go deeper into this issue during the course of this study, but it would certainly be an interesting subject for further research. Lessons regarding collective and alternative farming could be learnt from La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement of poor peasant men and women.22

Several authors have argued that control over land rather than ownership is the crucial factor in Bangladesh (White 1992; Rahman Khan 1992; Gardner 1995). Gardner (1995: 216) argued that, although formally women do not control resources, many of them, especially older women, do have considerable control behind the scenes within their own domains. Gardner, however, deals mainly with women from middle and rich peasant households and she does not make a distinction between the women who own and those who do not own land. White (1992:134) connects a woman’s control to the quality of her social relationships and the priority she gives to strengthening those relationships (giving up her rights strengthens her social relationship with her brothers). This relates to what Agarwal (1994: 54) calls a woman’s fallback position: “the outside options which determine how well off he or she
Debates on women, land and agency would be if cooperation ceased”. If e.g. a woman can fall back on her parents and brothers this strengthens her bargaining position vis-à-vis her husband. But whereas Agarwal argues that bargaining power strengthens a woman’s independence, White approaches the issue from the dependency side. She argues that the above means that in practice women’s income of property does not constitute a basis for women’s independence of men, but it may “serve crucially to strengthen the terms on which women negotiate their dependence” (White 1992:134). In other words, White contradicts Agarwal’s argument that land ownership would give women more independence. White argues that land ownership may change the form of dependency (but does not give independence). This in fact does not exclude that, within the context of a dependency relation, land may increases a woman’s negotiating power. As is obvious from the above, the issue of women and land is complicated. The mere fact that a woman owns land does not necessarily mean that she has more influence in the household and community or more control over her own life.

Land reform is one of the ways in which women may obtain land; therefore I discuss land reform issues in the last section of this chapter. Land reform has become a topic of renewed debates since the World Bank initiated new land reform programmes over the last decade.

2.7 Land reform

Debates on land reform have gone on for many decades and land reform was one of the most important issues of revolutionary liberation movements that waged struggles against feudal, colonial and other oppressive regimes in countries in the South with predominantly rural populations and stark class contradictions. The main aim was to liberate the poor peasants from exploitation and oppression by (absentee) landlords, and to abolish the landlord class by redistributing the latter’s vast landholdings among the poor who were cultivating those lands as tenants. Poor peasant were organised in mass movements through conscientisation programmes influenced by the ideas of Paolo Freire (1970) and ‘land to the tiller’ was one of the main slogans. The state was to carry out the land reforms. In several countries in the South land reform policies have been adopted and implemented from the 1950s, such as in the Indian states of Kerala and in West Bengal (Lieten 2003: Ch.5 and 6) and in several countries in Latin America (Deere and Leon 2001) Most of the land reform policies that were implemented benefited poor peasants and tenants, but they were gender blind. Land was redistributed to heads of households, mostly men, and gender inequalities and divergent gender interests within the household were ignored. In some cases women even lost their land due to land reform (Jacobs, 2001). The Sandinistas in Nicaragua were the first in Latin America to incorporate women as beneficiaries in their land reform programs (Deere & Léon 2001: 95-106). However, as Deere & Léon (2001: 96) found, an explicit state policy to include women was not sufficient for women to acquire land rights. Between 1979 and 1989 only 9.7 percent of the 59,545 beneficiaries of the Sandinista agrarian reforms in Nicaragua were women.
Since the 1990s, debates and policies on land reform have re-emerged, this time led by the World Bank. The present land reform programmes are very different in character. The main idea is that redistribution of land should take place through the market. Thus, land reform has been given a fundamentally different meaning; it has been made into an instrument of neo-liberal free market ideology and policies. It has nothing to do with the original idea of land reform as repairing historical injustices and equal redistribution of land by taking away excess land from the rich and distributing it to the poor. In this new concept of ‘land reform’, it is not the state, but the market that should take care of redistribution of land. Now poor peasants, men and women, have to buy excess land from rich peasants on the market instead of receiving back the land that has been taken away from them in the course of history; the poor are denied their rightful share. Policies are promoted that enhance the marketability of land, such as legal reforms to facilitate land market transactions, land titling and increased security of property rights, combined with credit facilities for the poor. During the past decade, the Bangladesh government has taken several measures along these lines, such as improving land registration procedures and reducing registration costs. The underlying argument is that agricultural production is more efficient if more land makes its way into the hands of small peasants (Carter, 2006) and if women are also landowners.23 Thus, this new concept of market-led ‘land reform’ is sold to the public as a measure of pro-poor growth, poverty reduction and gender equality. But in fact the objective is ‘mainstreaming’ (incorporating) the poor, in particular women, as producers and consumers in the competitive capitalist market economy that runs according to the principle of the right of the strongest.24 It will further indebted the poor, who will have to repay loans for many years, while rich peasant and landlords receive market value for their (often ill-obtained) excess land. Such programmes also contradict and undermine the proper implementation of existing government policies of land redistribution.25 Moreover, as civil society organisations rooted in peasant movements, women’s movements and other social movements26 have argued, neo-liberal markets are not pro-poor and not gender-neutral (Jacobs 2001); women now have to compete with their husbands within the household for land in the ‘free’ land market. Moreover, market-led land reforms promote and facilitate further privatisation of land, individualised land rights and commodification of land, which drives up the price of land and further strengthens the grip of corporate


24 Capitalist production relations will finally result in a disowned and exploited rural proletariat at one end of the scale and a class of rich entrepreneurs at the other end (see e.g. T.J. Byres 1991; Atiur Rahman 1986; Utsa Patnaik 1987; Deborah Bryceson 2000).

25 For experiences in Brasil with such programmes, implemented by the Cardoso government and continued by the Lula government see Resende and Mendonça (2005) The Counter-Agrarian Reform of the World Bank at http://www.landaction.org/display.php?article=273. Large landowners were ‘rewarded’ through such programmes, while large numbers of poor peasants were heavily indebted, only worsening their situation. For an elaborate critique of the market-led land reform see also Borras (2003).
Debates on women, land and agency

agri-business on agricultural production. Small landholders will be compelled to intensify cultivation to make their investments profitable. This means that it will increase their dependency on inputs from outside to increase production and on credit facilities, which may eventually lead to a dead end of insurmountable indebtedness. Or, as O’Laughlin (2006: 16, 17) argued in the context of the expansion of global capitalism, women and men with very small holdings will be likely to lose part of their livelihood base with the expansion of individualised land rights and land markets, as historically the commodification of land rights has led to the movement of people out of agriculture. Interestingly, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, expressed similar concerns in his Report to the UN General Assembly (Sixty-fifth session, 11 August 2010, pp.11,12). He argued that security of tenure should be seen as crucial to the realisation of the right to food, but that individual titling and the creation of a market for land rights may not be the most appropriate means to achieve this goal as this may lead to further land concentration. Instead, the report suggested the strengthening of customary land tenure systems and reinforcement of tenancy laws to improve the protection of land users and emphasised the importance of land redistribution. The report further specified that customary forms of tenure should be, if necessary, amended to bring them into line with women’s rights, the use rights of those who depend on commons, and the rights of the most vulnerable members of the community. The above issues will be examined in the context of rural Bangladesh.

2.8 Summary and Conclusion

I have discussed ongoing debates on women’s land ownership, structure and agency, and empowerment. These are the main debates and theories that have informed the leading questions of this study: what factors facilitate or constrain women’s ownership of and control over land, and does land ownership empower women to play a role in structural transformation? I have argued that Giddens’ structuration theory does not leave room for people, individually or collectively, to operate consciously against the structural rules and powers to transform structure in fundamentally different ways. I also argued that people on the margins of society are less trapped in social and cultural structures, such as class and gender ideologies, and therefore may be in a better position to act in defiance of, or ignore these structures. I will further investigate this, in particular with regard to women and empowerment. Following Batliwala (1994), Agarwal (1994) and Deere & Leon (2001) empowerment has been defined as a process in which women, individually and/or collectively, gain strength to challenge and change existing power structures.

26 Such as FIAN (Food First Information and Action Network) and the international peasant organisation Via Campesina (of which the Bangladesh Krishok Federation and its women’s wing Khishani Sabha are members).

27 The numerous deaths by suicide of farmers in Andhra Pradesh India as they saw no way out of their indebtedness are an example of this.

Kabeer’s proposed measurements of empowerment - availability of choice, decision-making power (agency) and the consequences of the choices - will be used (Kabeer 1999). As power relations differ within the various social structures, such as in marital relations, in the household, in the natal family and in the community, women’s decision making power will be investigated in the various social arenas and related to women’s ownership of land. Following Agarwal’s argument that women’s ownership of and struggle for land could be the most important source of empowerment for women (Agarwal 1994), the question what role does women’s land ownership play in their empowerment and how does this contribute to a structural transformation of gender and class inequalities will be examined. The focus will be in particular on poor peasant women, but the perspectives of middle and rich peasant women will be taken into account as well. Finally, I have discussed land reform policies in the past and the more recent debates on market-led land reform as pushed by the World Bank.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the economic transformation that has taken place in Bangladesh, in particular as a result of the introduction of the Green Revolution. As we will see, this has had serious consequences for class and gender relations, such as the rise of the dowry system.
3 Land and economic transformation

Before examining the questions posed in the first chapters, I need to draw a picture of the wider context of the economic and social transformation that has been and still is taking place in Bangladesh. This chapter deals with economic structures and economic transformation and the consequences for class and gender relations, in particular with regard to agriculture. I will substantiate my thesis that the introduction of the Green Revolution has led to greater class and gender differentiation. More people have become landless, creating a larger male wage labour force with more income earning opportunities, while poor women have lost their main source of income. These developments sketch the context of women’s land ownership and empowerment.

As land is the major focus of this study, I start with the various aspects of land rights and people’s relationships to land. The second part of this chapter deals with changes in agriculture that have taken place, in particular the introduction of the Green revolution, and its consequences for women and the poor, in particular poor women.

3.1 Land relations

Land is the most important means of production and source of livelihood security in rural Bangladesh.\(^{29}\) Of the 14.8 million hectares (approximately 36.5 million acres) of land area in Bangladesh 8.4 million hectares are under cultivation.\(^ {30}\) However, there is a huge class and gender inequality in the distribution of land. Landlords and rich peasant men own the largest proportion of land. In 1793, the British introduced the 1793 Permanent Settlement Act, which was based on the Mughal system of land settlement and tax collection. This Act formed the nucleus of the colonial system of control (Van Schendel 2009: 58) and had far-reaching consequences for social and economic relations. It gave land rights to a class of Zamindars (landlords) who had earlier been appointed by the Mughals as tax collectors.\(^ {31}\) The tenants who cultivated the land did not get any property rights.\(^ {32}\) I did not find any studies on the consequences of the Permanent Settlement Act for gender relations, but most likely there was no significant impact on the already subjugated position of women. Three years after Partition, the government of Pakistan (which included East Bengal, the present Bangladesh) introduced the 1950 East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act. With this Act the Zamindari system was abolished and a land ceiling of 100 bigha (33.3 acres)\(^ {33}\) was imposed. Tenants came directly

---

\(^{29}\) As a result of the agricultural transformation that has taken place with the introduction of the Green Revolution in the 1970s and 1980s (see further down in this chapter) there is a growing diversity of income in rural areas compared to 30 years ago. Nevertheless agriculture is still the most important means of income.

\(^{30}\) Information from the Ministry of Agriculture, see http://www.moa.gov.bd/statistics/bag.htm.

\(^{31}\) Mughals are the Islamic rulers who came from the west and invaded the region long before the arrival of the British. There were both Hindu and Muslim Zamindars, but Hindu Zamindars were probably in the majority in the Meherpur area. Big landlords are still referred to as Zamindars.

\(^{32}\) During the British colonial occupation private land ownership was introduced with the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 to maximise the profits for the colonial administration from land revenue (see e.g. Ramkrishna Mukherjee 1974: 328/329). Zamindars (landlords) who had been appointed as tax collectors by the Mughals were made the legal owners of the land.
under the state and the Revenue Department, which later became the Ministry of Land, was given the control over land. Gradually pressure on the land has been increasing (Plate 6), partly as a result of population growth. With an ever-growing fragmentation and scarcity of land, land alienation and conflicts over land became endemic, mostly instigated by and to the advantage of rich peasants. Poor peasants have been losing their land systematically, to a large extent as a result of tricks and extortion by rich peasants and moneylenders, but also due to agricultural policies that were most advantageous for rich and, to a lesser extent, middle peasants. More than half of the rural population is landless or near-landless and lives in poverty. In particular for landless widows and divorced women who have only very few income opportunities it is very difficult to survive. Women do have the right to inherit and own land, but many women do not get their rightful share.

This has partly to do with the fact that women do not work on the land. Women’s role is mainly in the household within the homestead and their socio-economic status is derived from their husbands’ position and/or their kinship. Their role in the production process is not recognised, although women do have important productive tasks (Plate 7). Men are seen as producers who provide the family income, while women are seen as caretakers of the household, responsible for reproductive tasks. Women are subordinate to men, first to their father, then to their husband and finally to their sons. An old Bengali saying is illustrative for the

Plate 6 Paddy fields with a jute field in the background. Fragmentation and pressure on the land can be noticed from the small size of the plots.

3.2 The (non-)distribution of khas land

In a situation where land is the most important means of subsistence, but where at the same time the distribution of land is highly unequal, redistributive land reform policies can be an important means to repair historical injustices, both with regard to class and gender. What about land reform programmes in Bangladesh? Successive governments have set a land ceiling and pledged that land would be distributed to landless or near-landless peasant men and women. In 1972, one year after independence from Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first President of the new country, issued a Presidential Order by which, among others, khas land (fallow government land) was to be distributed to landless peasants. In 1984, General Ershad, who had come to power through a military coup two years earlier, issued the Land Reform Ordinance in which the distribution of khas land to (near) landless families was reiterated and a ceiling of 60 bigha (20 acres) was set for future acquisition for land. However, there were no serious efforts to implement the reform. This was not surprising given the structural limitations of the Bangladesh state and society as politicians and bureaucrats were rich peasants themselves or depended

34 The ceiling thus did not apply to persons who already had more than 60 bigha of land. This indicates the unwillingness of the government to adopt a redistributive land reform – to take excess land from the rich and give it to the poor.
on their support (Atiur Rahman, 1986: 216-218). In 1987, a new Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy was introduced which included ways to incorporate NGOs in the allocation process. The main objective was to ensure that the Land Reforms Action Programme was put forward in a circular, which also dealt with an equitable use of land and equitable distribution of income (Mohiuddin Ahmed 1990: 62, 63). Both landless men and women were entitled to receive khas land. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who returned to power in December 2008, has reiterated the distribution of khas land to landless peasants once more. The government has taken some steps in this regard like setting up local Khas Land Allocation Committees, but experiences from the past have learnt that governments (including those led by the Awami League) are not keen on reclaiming khas land that is illegally occupied by the rich and powerful as they constitute an important part of their powerbase. More than one-third of the khas land is illegally occupied (Sarwar, Islam and Monzoor 2007). It is difficult to assess the total impact of khas land distribution. Official and unofficial figures on the amount of khas land vary widely. Barkat (2001) estimated that there are more than 10 million bighas (3.3 million acres) of distributable khas land. A Parliamentary Standing Committee reported 1.4 million acres of khas land in 2004 (Sarwar, Islam and Monzoor 2007). There are no official figures on how many men and women have received khas land since independence.35 What is certain is that despite all these Presidential Orders and Ordinances, implementation has been very slow and in reality most of the khas land, even land that has been allocated on paper to landless, remains illegally occupied by landlords and other powerful persons. Interference of the social power structure and corrupt practices are some of the main obstacles for implementation (Mohiuddin Ahmed, 1990: 120, 121).

Thus, clearly land redistribution cannot be solely left to the government. A few NGOs and peasant movements such as Nijera Kori and the Krishok Federation and its women’s wing the Kishani Sabha have been actively campaigning for implementation of the khas land distribution policy. They have organised landless peasants, men and women, occupied khas land and pressurised the authorities into giving those landless the legal ownership of the land. However, only a small part of all the khas land has come officially under the control of landless families, mostly in the char (newly reclaimed islands) areas in the south of the country. To give an example, in 1992 the Krishok Federation and Kishani Sabha occupied more than 22,000 acres of land on 4 chars in the south of the country. This met with a lot of violent resistance from the side of big landlords, but the landless could sustain their movement albeit with sacrificing lives. According to their own records, in total the Krishok Federation and Kishani Sabha occupied 70,600 acres of khas land in 22 chars and more than 102,400 poor peasant men and women were granted

35 To give an idea about the various figures that are floating around: In an editorial in the Daily Star of 3 February 2007 “Recovering khas land for poverty alleviation” by Md Abdul Kader, he mentioned that according to sources from the Parliamentary Committee on Ministry of Land there is more than 5 million acres khas land in the country and that many assume that the amount is much more than that.
one-year leases by the government. In 2000 the government granted the right of permanent settlement to the families occupying these chars (COPAC, 2000). Experience shows that only through prolonged collective struggles do people have a chance to materialise their right to land.

3.3 Women’s relationship to land
There are mainly four ways for women to acquire land. Apart from the distribution of khas land, women can inherit land, they can be gifted land in their name, or women can purchase land. The market plays only a limited role in women’s acquisition of land due to the gender bias of markets, but there are women who receive land that their husbands have purchased. Inheritance is the most common way for women to obtain land. In continuation of colonial policies to take religion as the determining principle to formulate personal laws, the right of Muslim women to inherit land has been laid down in the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961. This right was reconfirmed with the enactment of the Family Courts Ordinance 1985 (Ordinance No. 18 of 1985) by the government of independent Bangladesh. Muslim women are entitled to inherit their father’s property, but they get only half of what their brothers inherit. Women are also entitled to inherit from their husband: when he dies a widow gets one-eighth of her husband’s property if they have children and one-fourth if they have no children. What does this law mean for women’s ownership of land in reality? I will deal here only with some general aspects of women’s land rights and land ownership in Bangladesh; in Chapter 7, I will present my specific findings on women’s ownership of land in Jhagrapur.

Unfortunately, there are no nation-wide data on women’s ownership of land as government statistics on land holdings are not gender disaggregated. However it is a known fact that women own only a small proportion of the agricultural land in Bangladesh, despite their inheritance rights. Rounaq Jahan (1973:15/16) has pointed out that women renounce their share to safeguard their naior, the custom that a married woman yearly visits her paternal home for a longer period; there she has time to relax away from her household duties in her in-laws house. More importantly, women voluntary renounce their share to keep their brothers happy and, in exchange, the possibility to return to her paternal home and being taken care of by her brothers when in need is kept open. White (1992:131) called this ‘a straight trade-off between material and social capital’. In their study on gender and inheritance of land in a village in the north-western district, Gaibandha, Rahman & Van Schendel, (1997: 245, 255-257) however, have argued that women do not

37 The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 was enacted in Pakistan (till 1971 Bangladesh was East Pakistan) as a result of lobbying by the All Pakistan Women’s Association. (Tazeen Mahnaz, “Women, Islam and the State: Subordination and Resistance”, see: http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/Tazeen.html, accessed 2 May 2006) A new law, the Uniform Family Code, has been drafted in which the rights of women (also with regard to marriage and divorce) have been laid down more explicitly. This new law is meant to replace the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961. However, successive governments have time and again delayed its introduction.
renounce their share, but that they are denied control over their inheritance share by their paternal family due to importance given to ancestral land and the desire to control ancestral property in the paternal lineage. In their analysis, not the women, but the women’s brothers are the main role players. Only 2 percent of the women in their research village actually had the land in their own control; the land of the rest of the women was controlled mostly by their brothers. They argued that the inheritance laws in Bangladesh are not regulated purely by Hanafi law (the main Islamic school in Bangladesh), but “have been modified, codified, interpreted and promoted by three successive states: British India, Pakistan and Bangladesh”. They found a discrepancy between the Muslim inheritance law and the inheritance practice, what they called “the Bengali rule of inheritance”. Based on their findings, they argued that inheritance practices in Bangladesh do not follow formal ‘lawyers’ law’, but rather ‘living law’. They suggest that:

“Both men and women in rural Bangladesh are caught up in social arrangements which do not allow them to follow the rules of Islam. The most important of these is the system of kinship and marriage” (Rahman & Van Schendel, 1997: 251).

Women inherit and own land only in a symbolic way. They conclude that in practice (‘living law’) women are not entitled to land, but only to maintenance. The politics of male dominance have obstructed the application of Islamic law and inheritance practices reproduce gender inequality (1997: 272). Exogamy of women and the norm that land should not leave the patrilineage interfere with the right of women to inherit part of their paternal property. Thus, in contrast to the general perception that Islamic rules perpetuate gender inequality, their study shows that gender inequality is reproduced by means of inheritance practices, which take the form of blocking women’s access to land.

A few studies have suggested that more women have started to claim their inheritance share. Agarwal (1994:282-284) noted on the basis of several village studies in Bangladesh that there appeared to be an overall trend that more women claim their land rights. And, referring to some unpublished studies from Bangladesh, Agarwal also noted that sometimes women are pressured and even intimidated by their husbands to claim their share. It is not clear, however, on what data the observations that Agarwal referred to are based. All the studies that Agarwal mentioned were from the 1970s and 1980s, so this trend must have been visible for quite some time. Kabeer (1994:160) found that some of the women she

---


interviewed had been driven by poverty to claim their share, also suggesting that more women had started claiming their share. Rahman & Van Schendel (1997: 267) however, did not find that more women claimed their inheritance share than in earlier times. Unfortunately their data regarding inheritance are also not clear. They refer to land that women are entitled to inherit, so land that women should formally get and not to land that they actually obtained in practice. Nor do Rahman & Van Schendel mention whether their figures concern land inherited only from the father, or also from the mother and the husband.

Apart from ownership, control over land is an important issue for women in Bangladesh. Most women who own land do not have control over their land. One of the obstacles for women to control their own land is that they do not work on the land themselves, which makes direct control more difficult. This is connected to the rather strict gender division of labour. Men are the cultivators while most of the post-harvest operations, such as parboiling and drying of the paddy and maintaining the household are women’s tasks. As one woman in Jhagrapur remarked: ‘Amar kaj khali peter kaj’ (literally: my work is nothing but stomach work - only to fill stomachs). Women’s work is mostly done within the homestead (Plate 8).

In most of the literature on Bangladesh, this gender division of labour is connected to Islam and the practice of purdah (lit. veil, meaning women’s seclusion). It is often argued that the fact that women in Bangladesh have to conform to purdah requirements, which include restrictions on contact with men who are not related, makes it difficult for women to cultivate or manage their own land. They are dependent either on male family members or on hiring in labourers from outside. If a woman is married outside her paternal village it is even more difficult to take control over her
land as it may be far away from her in-laws’ village. I argue that the ideological basis of these social norms and specific gender roles and gender division of labour lies in the patriarchal ideology rather than in Islam. The fact that in other predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia women do work on the land indicates that Islam itself cannot be taken as the main reason that women do not work outside the house. Clearly this is a more complex issue. I will look further into this in chapters 7 and 8.

3.4 Introduction of the Green Revolution
After Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 through a bloody struggle, the first government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was initially inspired by a socialist ideology. But socialism was soon replaced by a capitalist ideology after army officers killed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. Western powers supported the military government of General Ziaur Rahman. The country has been increasingly incorporated into the globalised free market economy, to a large extent due to interventions by the state and NGOs, financed by foreign aid. Huge sums of foreign aid have flowed into the country and thousands of foreign-funded national and international development NGOs have emerged all over the country. Bangladesh has for a long time been one of the main recipients of aid from foreign donor governments and donor institutions. Foreign aid has played a crucial role in the transformation of Bangladesh society and foreign donors determined to a large extent the direction of development in Bangladesh. Only from the mid 1990s the main source of foreign currency gradually shifted when the garments industry developed and labour migration to other countries, especially to the Middle East and Malaysia, steadily increased.

In the 1970s and 1980s the most significant and visible economic transformation in rural Bangladesh took place in agriculture. With financial loans and technical aid from the World Bank and foreign donor governments, the government of Bangladesh introduced the Green Revolution in the early 1970 under its Integrated

40 Socialism and secularism were next to nationalism and democracy the four pillars of the Constitution of Bangladesh. The Soviet Union and Indira Gandhi’s India were Mujib’s most important allies. Socialism and secularism were dropped from the Constitution in 1977 during the military rule of General Ziaur Rahman.

41 Mujib’s popularity had waned increasingly with growing corruption and smuggling which culminated in the nation-wide man-made famine in 1974 as a result of large-scale hoarding of rice by big merchants (including government officials) to drive up the price. The famine had killed an estimated 50,000 people and rural insurgency, inspired by the Marxist-Leninist Naxalite movement in West Bengal, was growing. Consequently, most common people were happy with the overthrow of Mujib. The military coup against Mujib was done most probably with the prior knowledge of the CIA. Larry Lifschultz, South Asia correspondent of the Far Eastern Economic Review in Bangladesh at that time, has done extensive research on political events in the 1970s in Bangladesh and placed the coup against a much wider picture of geo-politics and connections of the political main players with US diplomats in Dhaka (see: Lifschultz 1979 part II).

42 Bangladesh became more dependent on foreign markets of goods and labour in the globalised economy. From the mid 1990s garments exports and remittances from Bangladeshi migrant labourers abroad especially to the Middle East and Malaysia, became more important sources of foreign currency, although around 50 percent of the government’s Annual Development Budget is still covered by foreign aid.
Land and economic transformation

Rural Development Programme (IRDP). This involved imported western technology and machinery, such as power pumps and drilling equipment, high yielding seed varieties (HYV) of paddy, and fertilisers and pesticides to increase production. Under this IRDP programme, following the so-called Comilla cooperative model\(^{43}\), peasants could get deep tube wells for irrigation at a subsidised rate on the condition that they would organise themselves in co-operatives to manage the deep tube wells collectively. The irrigation made it possible to grow an additional rice crop in the dry winter season (boro rice) and the production of paddy initially more than doubled.\(^{44}\)

From the 1970s feminist researchers have extensively shown that changes in the mode of production from a subsistence to a capitalist economy have a direct effect on the gender division of labour and the distribution of the means of production (in particular land), as well as on gender hierarchies (see e.g. Mies 1986, 1988; Beneria & Roldán 1987; Beneria & Sen 1982; Rogers 1980; Boserup 1970). In line with this, scholars have pointed out the far-reaching consequences that the Green Revolution has had worldwide for gender and class relations (see e.g. Sobha 2007; Shiva 1991; Stoler 1975).

Bangladesh went through a transformation from a predominantly subsistence farming to commercialisation and mechanisation of agriculture; peasants now have to buy most agricultural inputs from the market and invest in irrigation facilities and machines. The increased cost of cultivation has led to growing indebtedness and dependency on (transnational) companies for the necessary inputs. This has, in turn, led to a further concentration of the means of production in the hands of the rich and a proletarianisation of poor peasants due to loss of land. Poor peasants have increasingly been turned into wage labourers. Apart from the growing class differentiation, the agricultural transformation also has a gender dimension. With mechanisation and the introduction of rice mills, women have been pushed further out of the production process. In the next section, I will elaborate on the specific consequences for women.

3.5 Gender specific nature of agricultural transformation

Scholars have criticised western social science and western induced development (White 1999; Kearney 1996; Said 1995; Little and Painter 1995; Escobar 1995,1997; Hobart 1993; Ferguson 1990; Hancock 1989). Their main critique is

\(^{43}\) In Comilla, one of the districts in Bangladesh, a Green Revolution model had been developed in the 1960s based on cooperatives for farmers, jointly using irrigation facilities. This Comilla model was to be applied all over Bangladesh. Mahbub Alam Chashi, in the 1970s an alleged CIA agent, and allegedly linked to the planning of the coup against Sheikh Mujib, was one of the main motors behind the Comilla experiment, which became a showcase of capitalist land reform (Lifschultz, 1979: 118).

\(^{44}\) The requirements of fertilisers and pesticides for these HYVs have in the mean time led to depletion and poisoning of the soil and the groundwater, not only reducing the production, but also killing the fish in the marshes and streams which used to be free food for the poor. Moreover, these requirements have pushed up the cost of cultivation and thus reduced the gains. The penetration of the corporate world in agriculture has increased even further with the introduction of biotechnology and genetically manipulated seeds and plants that have made their way into Bangladesh as well. These developments have led to worldwide agitations against transnational companies and their genetically manipulated products; the most well known case is Monsanto with its BT cotton that has led to large numbers of farmer suicides in India.
that social theories and development programmes are largely based on Western constructs that are alien to (the reality of) the people in the ‘Third World’, such as the idea that development means technological innovation and industrialisation, and so they reproduce and strengthen the power relations that are embedded in these constructs that have their historical roots in the colonisation period. This is what has happened with the introduction of the Green Revolution in Bangladesh as well. In line with the western gender ideology prevailing at that time that men do the productive work and women mainly operate in the household, the Green Revolution (designed by men) mainly aimed at men. This fitted in well with the existing gender division of labour in Bangladesh. Men are regarded as the providers; they cultivate the land, go to the market and take care of the family income. Women are regarded as the dependents and the caretakers of the family within the homestead and their role in the production process is not recognised. Before the introduction of the Green Revolution parboiling, drying and husking paddy, grinding wheat and the preservation of the best seeds from the harvest to sow again for the next crop were important productive tasks of women. But with the increased yields of the high yielding varieties, rice mills have been introduced and husking and grinding has been taken over by machines. As men do the work outside the house and are considered more technically skilled, men are the operators of rice mills and irrigation pumps, men have been given training how to use Green

Revolution technology effectively, men get loans for agricultural inputs, etc. (Plate 9). Besides, as HYV seeds preserved from the previous crop do not produce good results, seeds now have to be bought in the market (by men). Gender ideologies and gender bias are reflected in the interventions in agriculture that have taken place. Men’s role as producers and women’s role as caretakers of the family have been strengthened. Whereas men had more work to do, such as buying seeds from the market, operating irrigation pumps and rice mills, women have been partly pushed out of the production process. Men, machines and the market have replaced women in their productive tasks and this has further strengthened the patriarchal belief that women play no role in the production process.

For women from poor peasant households, especially widows and divorced women, the agricultural transformation has been particularly disadvantageous. Earlier, they could make a meagre living by husking rice and grinding wheat for rich and middle peasant families or for the market. But with the introduction of the rice mills, this source of income has completely dried up, while alternatives have hardly arisen. While poor peasant men turned from petty producers into wage labourers or had to find alternative sources of income, their women lost their sole means of income and their productive tasks almost completely (Plate 10). They have no paddy to boil, dry and husk, except the paddy that their male household members receive as wages, nor do they have wheat to grind or seeds to preserve now. In contrast to poor peasant women, the workload of middle and rich peasant women has reduced as they have their paddy husked by the rice mills nowadays.
There is a clear class difference here. This class differential effect among women has also been observed by scholars elsewhere (Stoler 1977). While poor peasant women have lost important sources of income that have not been replaced by other income opportunities, rich and middle peasant women obtained more leisure time. White (1992: 75) found that, in contrast to the usual negative presentation of rice mills that she noted in the literature, the women in her research village regarded the rice mills as a positive change. But, she added, they also lost ‘an opportunity to bestow patronage’ by engaging poor women to husk their rice. Obviously White’s observation refers to rich and middle peasant women. Thus the introduction of the rice mills has reinforced unequal gender and class relations; the difference in position between men and women, but also between women of different classes has increased. These trends have been noticed all over Bangladesh (e.g. Chen 1986; White 1992; Rahman Khan 1992; Kabeer 1994), as well as in other Asian countries where the Green Revolution has been introduced (see Stoler 1975 on Indonesia; Stivens 1985 on Malaysia; Kumari 1998 on India). Despite considerable economic growth and large-scale development efforts there is no structural improvement in the double subordinate position of poor women. Rather, their situation has further deteriorated, without perspective for improvement.

As production and reproduction are interrelated, the impact of these changes in the production process on the gender division of labour are reflected in changes in the position of women in the household and in social institutions. Not only have women been further pushed out of their productive roles and have poor peasant households been further impoverished, women’s status has also been affected, both at the macro-level in society and at the micro-level in the household; women’s work is valued even less by men. Rahman Khan (1992) suggests that with the economic degradation of households and the consequent loss of part of women’s work, the value of these women as family labour has been reduced. In her study of a village in Dhaka district Rahman Khan (1992: 189) argues:

“The traditional role of women in domestic work [in post-harvest operations] provided them with a value as family labour. With economic degradation this role of women has been removed in many land-poor households. At the same time, the little income-earning work that is available for women are in public areas and primarily meant for men. Thus, while work that gives added value to women in the family is reduced, no alternative is available for absorbing them in status oriented work. And no new value is being attached to the new types of work that are being offered.”

On a critical note: the distinction between production and reproduction may be “artificial and male-biased”. “This distinction may tend to perpetuate the idea that females should be primarily responsible for reproduction and may hide the fact that reproduction, like production is “purposive and meaningful social activity” and can give rise to societal changes.” (McDaniel in Frank Trovato and Carl Grindstaff, (eds.) (1994: 285) Perspectives on Canada’s Population: An Introduction to Concepts and Issues, Toronto: Oxford University Press, quoted in http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/feb2498.htm.)
Rahman Khan, however, does not link the increasing impoverishment of the poor and the consequent loss of part of women’s productive tasks to the economic transformation of agriculture that is taking place. Besides, she refers only to poor peasant women. According to Rahman Khan, only poor peasant women have lost their value as family labour due to their degrading economic situation.\(^{48}\) She does not mention middle or rich peasant women in this connection, although she does mention that these households are ‘value setters and value preservers’ (Rahman Khan, 1992: 100).

My observations indicate that the position of women of all classes has become worse due to the loss of work and income as a result of the introduction of the rice mills, even though middle and rich peasant women have been affected less than poor peasant women. Women have been marginalised more and their role in the production process has been reduced. At the same time, men (mostly rich and middle peasants) have acquired a wider variety of means of production, not only rice mills, but also irrigation pumps and power tillers (owned, and operated by men), which in turn provide them with extra sources of income, investment opportunities and extra status. But whereas women’s status in the family has decreased in all classes due to loss of (part of) their productive tasks, poor peasant women have lost an important source of income and their livelihood on top of that. Poor women’s status has decreased on two fronts – as women due to the loss productive work and lack of status enhancing employment opportunities for women, and as poor class due to the loss of land. The changes in women’s productive role are not only a result of gender hierarchies but also of class hierarchies. Not only have poor peasant women lost their main means of income, there are hardly any other employment opportunities for women in the rural areas. In some areas, poor women reportedly have started working on the land (Agarwal 1994; Centre for Policy Dialogue 2000), but not in the Jhagrapur area.

### 3.6 Microfinance

Microfinance, rather than people’s right to productive resources, is now promoted worldwide as the solution for the poor to overcome poverty and a means of

---

\(^{47}\) In several places Rahman Khan talks about women’s ‘non-participation in productive work’. I do not agree with Khan that women’s work is non-productive. Women do not participate in productive activities outside the house, but they do inside their compounds. In fact, Rahman Khan contradicts herself. She does acknowledge women’s role in post harvest operations but at the same time she repeatedly emphasises women’s non-participatory (my italics) roles in the production process. She mentions that women’s roles continue to be regarded as secondary and supplementary, but in fact she does the same.

\(^{48}\) It should be added here that the concept of value is a social construct and that the value given to women is intrinsically linked to the prevailing ideology of male superiority and serves to reassert their superiority. It is men who determine the value of women, which is then in turn internalised by women. What Rahman Khan does not touch on is what consequences the changes in women’s role and their decreased value has for their lives. The lower the value given to a woman, the more dependent she becomes on her husband and other male members of her family for her status, and for her economic survival.

\(^{49}\) The Nobel Peace Price to Mohammed Yunus, the initiator of micro-credit, in 2008 has only added to this.
empowerment for women. As microfinance has now become the main activity of development NGOs in Bangladesh and due to my concern with strategies to end poverty and other injustices, it was not possible to ignore this subject in the course of this study. My findings indicate that the claim that microfinance empowers people and is the solution to end poverty is highly disputable.

In the 1980s microfinance programmes have been introduced in Bangladesh by Mohammed Yunus who set up the Grameen Bank. Microfinance is now the main income generating activity carried out by many foreign funded NGOs in Bangladesh. These programmes are being pushed by institutions like the World Bank. In 1998, out of 1200 foreign-aided NGOs, 369 dealt specifically with microfinance (Karim 2008). NGOs have focused their microfinance programmes mostly on women in line with the WID (Women in Development) paradigm promoted by western donors. The assumption behind these programmes is that women’s position can be improved if they can start their own business and so generate their own income. This will ‘empower’ them and raise their bargaining position in the household. Women are given relatively small loans to set up a small business. The Grameen Bank has been a pioneer of microfinance and its success of 98 percent repayment of the loans is widely praised. These repayment rates are in stark contrast with repayment rates of loans taken from banks. Especially many of the rich are notorious defaulters, which costs the state millions of Taka each year. The high repayment rate of microfinance loans is the result of the strategy to organise women in saving groups and make the group members collectively responsible for the repayment of everyone’s individual loans (Plate 11). Karim (2008) in her sharp analysis of microfinance programmes criticises NGOs for instrumentally appropriating the culture of Bangladeshi rural women’s honour and shame in their capitalist interests. She calls this “an economy of shame”. However, as experience has shown, not all women are successful small entrepreneurs and poor women who have only limited means of survival are often inclined to use their loan for consumption purposes or other urgent needs instead of investing it in some business and make profit. Studies on the impact of microfinance have shown contradictory outcomes regarding the empowering effect for women (Goetz and Sen 1996; Hashemi e.a. 1996; Mallick 2002; Mahmood 2003; Holvoet 2005). A more hidden motive of credit programmes is to incorporate women as consumers in the mainstream market economy. In fact it is an instrument of neo liberal policies in which NGOs function as a shadow state as they regulate people’s behaviour and facilitate the expansion of globalisation and neo-liberalism (Karim 2008). As women become entrepreneurs, they start operating in the market economy and have more cash in hand which they will at

---

50 In 1996 the World Bank provided a 105 million USD loan to Grameen Bank for micro-credit through its lending organisation IDA (International Development Association) and in 2001 IDA provided another 151 million USD loan for micro-credit to Bangladesh (Independent, 3 March 2001).

51 For instance, in July 2009 the finance minister presented a list of 2,196 companies that defaulted on repayment of loans for a total amount of around Taka 154.5 million. The main defaulters were industrialists and media houses (Priyo News Dhaka, Sunday, July 5, 2009 at http://priyo.com/news/2009/jul/09/28172.html.
least partly use to buy consumer goods which in turn will strengthen the market economy. So, on the one hand, NGO programmes aim at empowering women to counter gender inequality and challenge the prevailing gender ideology that only men are the income providers. On the other hand, these programmes strengthen a free market ideology and economy that is based on unequal class and gender relations. This is rather contradictory. The crux is that the concept of empowerment through microfinance does not include social structural transformation. In practice, microfinance strengthens existing inequalities. Moreover, although microfinance is usually promoted as a programme for poverty alleviation, most landless widows and divorced women are excluded from these programmes. They cannot afford to put even a small amount of money into the group savings account every week. Microfinance programmes do not tackle the root causes of poverty and gender and class inequalities and in fact even strengthen some of these inequalities. The widespread focus on microfinance is taking attention away from other income generating options, such as for instance supporting women in claiming the land that they are entitled to inherit, distribution of khas land to women and organising women’s groups for collectively leasing or purchasing land for cultivation. I argue that a focus on women’s ownership and control over land would be much more empowering and much more effective against poverty than microfinance. Class and gender inequalities are rooted in the structural unequal distribution of the productive resources going hand in hand with exploitation of the poor and of women. Rather than microfinance, control over land would give women livelihood security. The scope of collective land holding/leasing by women, as proposed by Agarwal (1994, 2003), may be a more suitable and sustainable alternative for poor peasant
women in Bangladesh and would also imply recognition of women’s role in production. Such initiatives would contribute to a fundamental economic and social transformation if they would be accompanied by a change in agricultural methods, away from the increasingly corporate hijacking of agriculture. I will be come back to this with concrete examples and observations in later chapters.

3.7 Dowry and its consequences

The gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation has also had an impact on women’s social status in society and, at the micro level, in the household and the family. Compared to 1975, on the whole the same norms and values related to marriage still prevail, but with the ongoing economic transformation and increasing external influences, changes are happening; women’s value has gone down. The most dramatic change related to the economic transformation has been the penetration of the dowry system to all layers of society and the exponential growth of the dowry sum. Dowry is an amount of money and/or goods to be paid by the family of the bride to the family of the bridegroom. In this section I will discuss general aspects of the dowry system. In chapter 6, I will discuss the consequences of dowry in detail and I will give examples of how the dowry system has affected the lives of people in Jhagrapur.

In 1974/75 it was common for rich peasant families to give some presents like a bicycle, a watch or a ring to the bridegroom at the time of marriage, but seldom did the bridegroom receive a sum of money. Nowadays bridegrooms of all classes demand dowry; hardly any marriages take place without dowry, and especially poor peasant families with daughters have been hit very hard by the demand for dowry. The increase in dowry demands has coincided with the economic transformation and there may well be a relation between these two. The dowry system has had far-reaching consequences for economic and social relations. Dowry has developed gradually over a few decennia. Earlier, dowry was seen as a Hindu practice while Muslims had the bride price (mohr or dower) - a sum of money or golden jewellery, which the groom’s family is supposed to give to the bride in case the marriage is dissolved. The mohr is written in the marriage contract and is meant as a security for the wife in case of divorce. Ahmed and Naher (1987: 139) have pointed out that several researchers have claimed that the dowry system has replaced the practice of mohr, but that in fact dowry now coexists with the system of mohr. Villagers confirmed that the practice of mohr is still continuing.

It is not completely clear when exactly and why the dowry system emerged in Bangladesh but it already existed in some form in the 1940s among the elite. In his

---

52 In Hindu marriages in India dowry emerged around the 1930s. The Indian Dowry Prohibition Act was enacted in 1961. In the act dowry is defined as: ‘any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly - (a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or (b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any other person to either party to the marriage or to any other person; at or before or any time after the marriage in connection with the marriage of said parties but does not include dower or Mohr in the case of persons to whom the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) applies.’ [http://socialwelfare.delhigovt.nic.in/dowryact.html].
classic study of six villages in Bengal in the 1940s, Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1971: 272) reported dowry cases in three wealthy Muslim families in two villages. He remarked that dowry had been absent before that. The Kushtia District Census Report 1961 (p.16) mentioned incidental cases of dowry in middle and rich classes. So indeed, incidents of dowry occurred before the 1970s, but it emerged only on a large scale after 1971. In the literature, a variety of explanations have been given for the rise of the dowry system. Amin and Cain (1997) gave the surplus of girls of marriage age as the explanation and Rozario (1998: 270) referred to this reason as well. Rozario called this skewed distribution of the population with regard to age a social construction as it is the result of the norm that a boy has to be older than the girl he is marrying. Another explanation for the rise of the dowry system is that where previously a daughter in law was to some extent regarded as an asset because of her labour power and reproductive capacities, when women’s productive tasks were partly taken over by machines and the market, women were seen as a burden rather than an asset. The bridegroom and his family then had to be compensated for maintaining the bride (Kabeer, 1988; Rahman Khan, 1992). This explanation suggests that dowry may well be, at least partly, connected to the economic transformation itself. I argue that the rise of dowry demands is related to the introduction of the Green Revolution, combined with the commercialisation of production and globalisation with its consumer goods entering the market. With the Green Revolution, the cost of agricultural production increased manifold and required a lot of cash money. Earlier most of the inputs such as seeds, manure and labour power had been generated on the farm itself, but then HYV (High Yielding Variety) seeds, fertiliser and pesticides had to be bought in the market, etc. Dowry became a quick and easy way to acquire a large amount of cash money. Besides, capital and consumer goods became more readily available which possibly generated greed that could be materialised in the form of dowry. The dowry system has provided an additional way for men to accumulate capital and appropriate wealth.

Officially, dowry has been forbidden by the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, but as is the case with many laws, it is hardly enforced in practice. Instead, dowry demands are ever increasing. Whereas in the mid 1980s around 2000 Taka dowry was demanded from poor peasant families, by 2010 this had gone up tenfold to 20,000 Taka or more. For poor families with several daughters the dowry system is disastrous. Dowry demands can completely ruin a family. Many families sell or mortgage their land in order to marry their daughters, leading to their (further) impoverishment. The dowry system has had wide-ranging consequences for women, not only economically but also socially, especially from poor families. It has increased women’s dependency and gender inequality. A boy has become even more of an asset because through his marriage a family can acquire wealth, while a daughter is an even bigger burden on her parents and a liability now. Although

---

53 According to Ahmed and Naher (1987: 138) in Islam Mohr is actually paid for sexual possession of the woman, part of the Mohr is given for the virginity of the woman.
54 This suggests that in the late 1970s dowry started becoming a serious problem.
a woman officially has to give her consent to her parents’ proposal of a marriage candidate, she has little or no influence on the choice of her future husband. Her parents decide on the bridegroom and negotiate the marriage contract and dowry agreement. Parents try to find the ideal bridegroom for their daughter who can provide her with a secure and happy future and who will provide the family with a higher status. But for poor families, the choice of a bridegroom is severely restricted by their financial situation and often determined by the height of the dowry demand.

A new phenomenon connected to dowry is that there is an increasing tendency for poor unmarried women to seek employment and start saving for their own dowry to come out of this trap. So far this is mostly in urban areas where women get employment in the garments industry (Rozario, 1998; Kabeer, 2000). Some of these women also arrange their own marriage and they break out of the dependency on their family. Similarly, Anja Rudnick (2003) reported about women who migrate abroad to work as industrial labourers.

Dowry demands affect a rich peasant family much less as they have a surplus. Moreover, if a rich peasant family pays a high dowry to marry off their daughters, this further increases their status and means less value loss for the daughter. At the same time, rich peasant families who marry off their sons can make much higher demands than poor peasant families and are therefore more advantaged by the dowry system. Differences in status between men and women have increased due to dowry, but relatively more so in the poor classes. In this way gender inequalities and class inequalities interconnect and reinforce each other.

Dowry has not only led to further impoverisation of peasant women and men, it has also led to increasing violence against women amounting to torture and killings. If husband and in-laws are not satisfied with the amount of dowry given, the bride suffers the consequences, sometimes till years after marriage. This happens, for instance, when the agreed dowry sum has not yet been fully paid because the parents could not mobilise the full amount immediately. It also happens that after marriage the in-law family keeps on demanding more dowry than had been agreed at the time of the marriage. In such cases the wife is harassed, not only by her husband, but sometimes also by her parents-in-law until the amount has been paid. The harassment may even continue after the full amount has been paid if the in-laws feel that they actually did not receive enough. Newspapers report regularly about women who have been tortured or killed for dowry. Based on newspaper reports Ain o Shalish Kendra, a legal aid and human rights organisation, reported 285 cases of physical torture, including four acid-burn cases and 195 deaths from physical torture, including one suicide in 2009. Odhikar, another human rights organisation, reported 227 dowry-related killings and 11 dowry-related suicides in
2009 on the basis of information from 40 districts, and reports in national dailies. For the first quarter of 2010 (January to March) Odhikar reported 46 dowry-related killings and 20 women had been tortured, of which two committed suicide. The number of unreported incidents is no doubt manifold; the reported cases are likely to be only the tip of the iceberg.

3.8 Summary and Conclusion
This chapter draws a picture of land relations and the economic transformation that has taken place in Bangladesh since 1975. The introduction of the Green Revolution and neo-liberal policies has had far reaching economic and social consequences and has led to greater class and gender differentiation. More peasants have lost their land and have become wage labourers which has further increased the gap between poor and rich peasants, and men and women. The gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation has also had an impact on women’s position. With the introduction of rice mills, important productive tasks of women have been taken over by machines operated by men and women have been further pushed out of the production process. Middle and rich peasant women’s workload has reduced, but poor peasant women lost an important source of income and have difficulties in finding ways to survive as there are hardly alternative income opportunities. The increase of the dowry system, which is related to the economic transformation, has been dramatic for poor peasant families with daughters. I have argued that dowry demands are related to the high increase in cost of agricultural production, combined with the commercialisation of production and globalisation. Dowry has become a quick and easy way to accumulate money. These developments have led to increasing violence against women. Finally, reservations about microfinance as the solution to poverty have been brought forward and I have argued that women’s control over land would be much more effective in bringing women out of poverty and providing them with livelihood security.

The next chapter provides the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. I will deal with ongoing processes of social transformation, in particular with regard to Islam, moral values and gender ideologies. Changes in women’s mobility, education and family planning and a decline of the traditional power structure will also be discussed.
Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagpur revisited
4 Gender ideology and social transformation

Economic transformation of society does not only have an impact on people's economic conditions and production relations, it also influences social relations; changes in social institutions take place as well. The gender inequality in the ownership of the means of production and division of labour are reflected in social institutions, such as marriage, education and health care. This chapter will give an insight in the social, cultural and religious aspects of life in Bangladesh that reflect the norms and values that find expression in class and gender relations. These also play an important role in women's access to land and their control over land. As Islam is an important facet of life and of gender relations in Bangladesh, I will start this chapter with a description of the changing role of Islam to give a better understanding of the wider context of women's relationship to land. After that, I will elaborate on the position of women in Islam and other dominant gender ideologies. I will contrast Islamic norms and values with norms and values promoted by NGOs, international agencies and in some cases the state. These norms and values represent conflicting gender ideologies, which at times lead to contradictions in norms and practices. I will argue that these contradictory tendencies have led to tensions between various forces, but may also give women an opportunity to defy authority and use these contradictions to their own advantage. Women can sometimes use structure for their agency.

This chapter will be followed by two chapters in which I will give an assessment of the specific impact of the economic and social transformation on the lives of people in Jhagrapur. In those chapters I will give various examples to illustrate what the transformation means for the daily life of the people.

4.1 Islam in Bangladesh

With a population of around 150 million and 85 percent of its inhabitants Muslims, Bangladesh is the fourth largest Muslim country in the world. For a long time Bangladesh was known for its moderate form of Islam where Sufism has had a strong influence. The new Bangladesh was initially a secular state and for the people their Bengali identity would come first. They were proud of their culture and language for which they had shed a lot of blood. Since the late 1970s, the influence of Islam is on the increase, both at the state level and among the people.\(^{56}\) While the Bengali identity is still very important, more than before people also emphasise their Islamic identity. In 1977, the military ruler General Ziaur Rahman dropped secularism (and socialism) from the Constitution and in 1988 General Ershad\(^{57}\) declared Islam the state religion by an amendment to the Constitution. There was a strong resistance from civil society against this, led by a coalition of women's organisations, the Oikyo Bodhio Nari Shomaj (United Women's Forum) (Shehabuddin 2008). Naripokkho, one of the women's organisations active in the

---


57 General Ziaur Rahman came to power after a military coup in November 1975 and was killed in 1981 in a failed military coup. General Ershad grabbed power through yet another military coup in 1982. From 1975 to 1990 Bangladesh was under military rule.
protests, filed a written petition against the state claiming that the amendment was contrary to the fundamental rights of women.58 However, they failed to prevent this move by the government, signalling the dependence of the state on the support of other Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia had started giving considerable financial aid to Bangladesh while General Ziaur Rahman was in power. Saudi’s financial aid was given mainly for the purpose of building mosques and setting up madrashahs (Islamic schools) and other Islamic institutions.59 Between 1981/82 and 1990/91, the number of madrashahs (Koran schools) more than doubled and the number of staff and enrolment of students increased by nearly 300 percent.60 Moreover, Islamists who had collaborated with Pakistan during Bangladesh’s liberation war were systematically rehabilitated, including notorious war criminal Golam Azam, the Armeer of the Jamaat-e-Islami till 2000. The Mujib government (1971-1975) had cancelled Azam’s citizenship and he lived in exile in Pakistan, but General Ziaur Rahman allowed him to return to Bangladesh in 1978. In 1994, when Ziaur Rahman’s widow Khaleda Zia was Prime Minister, Azam’s citizenship was restored by a decision of the Supreme Court.

Another wake-up call was the fatwa against writer Taslima Nasreen. In 1993 Mullahs (religious leaders) ordered her death. They stated that she had insulted Islam with her newly published novel Lajja (Shame). In this novel she described the agony of a Hindu woman during communal attacks. The government did not give Taslima Nasreen protection and she had to flee the country; she is still living in exile. Fatwas were a new phenomenon and other fatwas, especially against women and progressive writers, followed. Political Islam has given rise to increasing violence against women (Women Living Under Muslim Law 1996; Guhathakurta 2005), not only by issuing fatwas but also other forms of violence. In particular women who do not strictly conform to Islamic values and morals as interpreted by Islamists are still targeted. Newspaper articles and other sources regularly report about gruesome

59 Saudi Arabia refused to recognise the new state of Bangladesh until General Zia took power (Kabeer, 1991). In Saudi Arabia the majority of the people adhere to Wahhabi Islam and the Sharia. Wahhabi norms and values are promoted through madrashas and Islamic institutions.
60 According to Tazeen Mahnaz. (undated) “Women, Islam and the State: Subordination and Resistance” the number of madrashahs rose from 2864 in 1981/82 to 5959 in 1990/91 (http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/Tazeen.html, accessed 2 May 2006). Mahnaz took these figures from the Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh (SPB). I found in SPB 1990 that in particular the number of madrashahs had gone up (from 3439 to 5284) between 1986 and 1988. After that the increase was less dramatic. However, the reliability of these figures in the Statistical Pocketbook is questionable. E.g. according to SPB 1993 the number of madrashahs in 1991 was 6022 whereas SPB 1991 mentions only 5959 madrashahs in the same year, and SPB 2004 and 2008 show different numbers of madrashahs for the years 2001, 2002 and 2003.
62 Motiur Nizami Rahman, who was also a collaborator with the Pakistani during the liberation war, got a minister post. He took over the leadership of the Jamaat-e-Islami in December 2000 from notorious war criminal Golam Azam.
incidents of male violence against women. In January 2001 the Bangladesh High Court declared *fatwas* illegal. Nevertheless *fatwas* are still being issued.61

A factor that may also play a role in the increasing influence of political Islam is labour migration to the Gulf region. Migrants who return to Bangladesh bring home Wahabi Islamic norms and values from their host country and promote these in their own household and community. For example, some husbands now make their wives wear a *burka* or a separate veil covering most of their face when they go out, rather than only pulling their *sari* over their head.

The internationalisation of political Islam, fuelled by the rise in prejudices against Islam and discrimination of Muslims in western countries after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001 has contributed further to this growing Islamisation. This was also reflected in national politics. In the national elections on 1 October 2001 (less than three weeks after 9/11) the Jamaat-e-Islami increased its seats in parliament from two to seventeen and the Islami Oikyo Jote, an alliance of several Islamic parties, gained 14 seats. Khaleda Zia’s BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) formed an alliance with both these parties and the Jamaat-e-Islami was rewarded with two ministers’ posts in the cabinet.62 For the first time Islamists were taking part in the government. But in the national elections (Plate 12) in December 2008 the Awami League with its secular agenda promised to try the 1971 war criminals and won a two-thirds majority; the Jamaat-e-Islami could retain only two seats in parliament which drastically reduced its influence in national politics. In 2010, top leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami were arrested for alleged war crimes and the war crimes tribunal started its proceedings.

Plate 12  Election posters in 2006 with Awami League and BNP candidates next to each other.
The surfacing of the JMB (Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), responsible for more than 400 simultaneous bomb explosions in 63 districts all over the country on 17 August 2005, has made it clear that political Islam and terrorism have become a dangerous force in Bangladesh. The JMB is reportedly linked to Al Qaeda and has close connections to the Jamaat-e-Islami. For a long time, the BNP government denied the threat of political Islam, but in February/March 2006, due to international pressure, the main leaders of the JMB were finally arrested. Some of these leaders received the death sentence and have been executed, but the JMB has not been eradicated by far. Regularly new arrests of JMB members are reported in the media.

The changing role of Islam that I have sketched above - from an initial emphasis on Bengali identity to a growing tendency to emphasise an Islamic identity - forms an important part of the background picture needed to understand the contradictory tendencies in Bangladesh society regarding the position of women in society. Ideologies are not static, they change over time and structures are not monolithic entities but are full of internal contradictions. Gender ideologies adhered to by Islamic forces, by the state, by civil society and by western bilateral and multilateral agencies can be reinforcing each other, but are more often competing with each other. The state has to balance between these conflicting gender ideologies which at times leads to contradictory trends and tensions. These contradictions within the structure sometimes give women space to act. Certain conditions, both within structures and in individual circumstances, can enable or constrain women to act in defiance of oppressive structures and bring about changes, either individually in their own circumstances, or collectively in society. Structure does not necessarily constrain women’s agency, it can also allow space for women’s own creativity, or women can even use structural aspects to exert their agency. When the balance of power is on a side that is favourable to women’s demands, women can make use of the internal contradictions to advance their struggle for gender equality. Before I elaborate further on existing contradictions I will say something about how women are seen in Islam and the values and moral prescriptions that are imposed on them.

4.2 Islam, moral values and gender ideology

Purdah (literally veil, referring to the practice of seclusion of women) is one of the most important prescriptions of Islam to regulate women’s behaviour and gender relations.63 In Islam seductive power is attributed to women, they are seen as a potential danger for men. Therefore, so as not to arouse strange men and to protect women’s chastity, women have to go veiled (El Saadawi 1980: 257-259). The practice of purdah reinforces prevailing patriarchal norms.64 Closely connected to purdah is the concept of izzat [honour], which is mostly identified with women’s

---

63 Apparently purdah is derived from organising principles that existed in Bangladesh and India before the arrival of Islam (Rozario 1998:259).

64 In Bangladesh more than 85% of the population is Muslim. In Jhagrapur there is only one Hindu family, the rest of the population is Muslim. Therefore I deal mainly with Muslim women in this book.
chastity. To protect women’s chastity and the family’s (men’s) honour *purdah* has been invented to keep women’s sexuality under control. The practice of *purdah* aims at controlling women and reinforces prevailing patriarchal norms. Marriage is the institution that regulates women’s sexuality, reproduction and gender relations and is one of the main mechanisms of subordination of women. Therefore a single woman, unmarried or divorced, is perceived as a threat; she can bring dishonour, not only to her family but to the whole community, as her sexuality is not under the control of a husband (Rozario 1992; Akpinar 1998). *Purdah* norms and values, and the honour of a family and the community, play an important role in defining women’s roles, their behaviour and their position in society. In Bangladesh, a woman who is modest and shy, who stays confined to her house and does not interact with men outside her family is regarded as a ‘good’ woman (Plate 13). This ‘good’ woman identity is clearly imposed on women. It is debatable whether the ideological basis of these social norms and specific gender role lies in Islam or rather in patriarchal ideology. The ‘good woman’ norms and gender roles do not only exist in Islamic societies but in all patriarchal societies. Women are seen as the representatives of the core identity of a group (Schrijvers 1999: 308) and women as carriers of a group’s identity “are given the social responsibility of maintaining group boundaries” (Akpinar 1998: 48). Consequently, the dominant idea is that a woman who violates these gender norms by moving around freely without the control of male family members, damages the identity of the group and is seen as a threat to the honour of the family and society. Women who are regarded as damaging the honour of the group often meet with violent reactions. Men use the
(threat of) violence to assert their authority over women and to punish violations of societal norms regarding proper women’s behaviour. Male violence ‘to set a woman right’ is socially accepted by many. This structural violence against women is an expression of their subordinate position. I argue that the ideological basis of these gender specific norms lie in patriarchal ideology rather than in Islam. In a way, the patriarchal ideology that men are the providers and women the caretakers, and the Islamic inheritance laws contradict each other. In particular the practice of purdah and women’s right to maintenance that is laid down in the Koran, have reinforced the patriarchal ideology of subordination and dependence of women. On the other hand, Islam has given women inheritance rights, albeit not equal rights to men.

4.3 Contradictory developments
Increasing emphasis on an Islamic identity and the growth of political Islam with its excesses in the form of fatwas is not the only development. Simultaneously, there have been developments in another direction. Since the late 1960s, feminists worldwide have revolted against male-dominating ideologies and raised criticism that development programmes are male-biased and increase gender inequality.

65 Other forms of male violence, such as rape, acid throwing, killing and suicide as a result of male torture are also regularly reported in the press and by human rights organisations. Acid attacks are a relatively recent form of violence against women, first recorded in Bangladesh in 1983. In an acid attack a boy throws acid on a girl for instance because she refused to marry him or refused to have a sexual relationship. In 2002 the government introduced the Acid Crime Control Act of 2002 and the death penalty for throwing acid while the Acid Control Act of 2002 was introduced to control the sales of acids. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs reported that 172 women had been victims of acid attacks in 2009 (Odhikar 2010). If a woman survives an acid attack she is maimed for life.

66 This was renamed Ministry for Women and Children’s Affairs in 1994.
They also pointed out that women are not helpless victims who are resigned to their fate, but that they are also actors and agents of social change (Boserup 1970; Rogers 1980; Beneria & Sen 1981). In response to this the UN declared a Decade for Women (1980-1990) and western donors started pushing governments and development organisations to focus on women in their programmes. With the likely prospect of foreign funds, the government of General Zia set up a Ministry for Women's Affairs in 1978, one year after secularism was dropped from the Constitution, and policies for women’s development were adopted. Similarly NGOs started targeting women and, driven by poverty, women increasingly came forward to participate in their programmes.

Due to these influences, the visibility of women has increased tremendously since the 1970s (Plate 14). Whereas, earlier, women were mostly not seen in public spaces, NGOs and government programmes now gave them a reason to move around their villages to visit a group meeting of their credit group, get a contraceptive injection or go to the bank in the nearby town to deposit their group savings or collect or invest money that their husbands sent from abroad. Not only poor peasant women, but also middle peasant women and even a few rich peasant women have joined such programmes. Another programme that was the result of increased attention for the development of women is a stipend programme for girls enrolled in high school and more recently also for girls studying in college that the Khaleda Zia government introduced in the 1990s. As a result, many more girls participate in higher education compared to the 1970s. Daily groups of teenage girls move around in rural areas on their way to high school, something that could not be seen in the 1970s. The mobility of women in urban areas, especially in and around the capital Dhaka has also increased as a result of the development of the garment industry. In the early morning, crowds of women can be seen in the streets of Dhaka and its adjacent areas on their way to the factory (Plate 15),
something that was unthinkable in the 1970s. The necessity for poor women to earn an income to survive prompted them to take up a job in a garment factory.

In reaction to these developments, Islamic groups started agitating against (mostly foreign funded) NGOs. In their eyes, these were promoting western values that were symbols of moral decay and against Islamic rules. A series of fatvas were also issued against NGOs and especially during the mid 1990s there were several violent attacks on NGO offices and schools. The reaction of Islamic forces was also to put an even greater emphasis on purdah restrictions and the norm that women should not work outside the house. In contrast, women started creatively redefining the concept of purdah in such a way that it would allow them to make use of opportunities offered by the government and NGOs, but at the same time would conform to social norms and values. Women moulded the meaning of purdah from a concept of physical seclusion into a concept of ‘purdah of the mind’ (Amin 1995; Rozario 1998; Kabeer 1994; Shehabuddin 2008; Rudnick 2009), clearly demonstrating their agency. For instance, Rudnick (2003, 2009:130, 131) found in a study on Bangladeshi migrant women in Malaysia, living away from their families, that these women emphasised their ‘inner’ qualities of purity rather than the ‘outer’ qualities of purdah, of being confined to the homestead. They had to move around to do their jobs and take care of themselves, but were more careful to cover their bodies properly to show their decency, their ‘pure’ mind and sincere intentions to avoid being labelled as ‘bad’ women. This indicated their personal responsibility, rather than control by guardians. By redefining purdah they renegotiated the boundaries of permissible behaviour.

At times the state was caught in between these competing and contradictory ideologies - the secular ideology of NGOs and their agenda of women’s equality and the Islamic ideology with its emphasis on purdah (Shehabuddin 2008: 115, 116). On the one hand, the state was dependent on western foreign aid. On the other hand, it needed the support of Islamic groups and other Islamic countries. To add even more to the dilemma of the state, western donors increasingly demanded repression of political Islamic groups, especially after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. The dilemma was also demonstrated when the Advisors’ Council of the Interim Caretaker government approved the National Women Development Policy (NWDP) on March 8, 2008. Political Islamist Mullahs immediately staged militant protests against this policy, demonstrating their resistance against gender equality. The Policy guarantees equal rights for women, in agreement with the equal rights principle laid down in the Bangladesh Constitution. It had been pending for years; first adopted in 1997 during the previous Awami League government’s tenure (1996-2001) when it included equal rights to inherited property, but later stalled and modified by the BNP government. To the dismay of women’s rights organisations, in reaction to the protests by Mullahs, the Caretaker Government formed an Ulema Committee to review the policy. This committee strongly recommended omitting or changing several provisions, such as equal inheritance rights for women as they were un-Islamic and the Caretaker
government partly backtracked from its intention to adopt the policy. Male hegemony and resistance against gender equality were once again demonstrated.

With the Awami League back in power since December 2008, the state is leaning once more towards secularist tendencies and supports women’s equal rights. Sheikh Hasina declared on 8 March 2009 (International Women’s Day) that she would reintroduce the National Women Development Policy. On 8 March 2010 Sheikh Hasina reiterated her promise to reintroduce the policy. She also promised to undo the changes made by the BNP government and stated that women should have equal rights to property. The latter is remarkable as it is a contentious issue as we have seen above, particularly contested by orthodox Muslims because, according to the Koran, women are entitled to only half the share of their brothers. Finally, the day before 8 March 2011 the policy was officially approved in a cabinet meeting. However the issue of equal inheritance rights has been avoided in the policy. When asked, the state minister for Women and Children’s affairs said the NWDP would not contradict the Muslim family law as it is not a law and does not affect the inheritance laws. Reportedly, the policy provides women with “full control” over their inherited and earned property; it does not mention equal inheritance rights. Conservative Muslim leaders loudly protested the government’s decision once more and threatened to paralyse the country if the NWDP is not annulled. The future will determine the government’s sincerity to effectively implement equal rights for women.

4.4 Education and gender

Education can be a factor in women’s inheritance of land. This section describes the present situation of education in Bangladesh and the role that education plays for women in getting or claiming their inheritance rights. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of education in the empowerment of women (Stormquist 2002; Kumar and Gupta 2008). Female literacy and the degree of participation of girls and young women in education is an indication of their position in society (Plate 16).

In line with the increased attention for the development and empowerment of women and their participation in society, the government introduced a nationwide stipend programme for girls in 1994, the ‘Female Secondary Schools Assistance Project’ (FSSAP), with financial aid from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Norwegian government.

Realising that poverty was an important reason for non-enrolment and poor performance in primary school, the government also set up a primary education stipend programme for poor children in 2002.

68 In this context it is interesting to note that in Indonesia, also a Muslim majority country, there are two parallel inheritance laws, the Muslim inheritance law and the customary laws (Adat) according to which women get an equal inheritance share. (Ratna Saptari through personal communication.)
Girls who are enrolled in high school receive a monthly stipend under FSSAP on condition that they maintain satisfactory grades and attendance, and their parents have to agree to delay the girl’s marriage until she has completed her studies. The main stated objectives of the stipend programme are to obtain gender parity in education, enhance women’s income earning opportunities, and reduce population growth by motivating the girls and their parents to postpone the girl’s marriage till after completion of high school.

Despite the fact that the monthly stipend is only a small amount of money and despite a high drop out rate, numerous irregularities and corruption, it is clear that the stipend programme has contributed to a greater enrolment of girls in high school. In the 1970s only very few girls in rural areas participated in high school education and they were mostly rich peasant daughters. Now many girls attend high school at least for a few years. According to figures from the World Bank, girl’s enrolment in high schools has tripled nationwide from 1.1 million in 1991 to 3.9 million in 2005.

---

69 This ‘Female Secondary Schools Assistance Project’ (FSSAP) ended in 2001 and was followed by FSSAP II. According to World Bank project appraisal Report No: 23594-BD (2002): “This FSSAP II project sustains improved gender equity, and adds activities and incentives to improve the quality of education in participating schools and to improve both the management capacity of the Ministry of Education and monitoring and accountability mechanisms at the community level.” FSSAP II ended in 2008 and was followed by ‘The Secondary Education Access and Quality Enhancement Project’ (SEAQEP). This new project provides stipends not only to poor girls but also to poor boys in secondary education. Evaluations of the programme had showed that girls enrolled in high school began to outnumber boys more and more (see: http://www.worldbank.org.bd/WEB/EXTRAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/BANGLADESHEXT/N0..contentMDK:21560858--pPK:141137--pPK:141127--theSitePK:295760,00.html, accessed 1 March 2009).


71 In 1996 a girl in 6th grade received 25 Taka per month, in 7th grade 30 Taka and in 8th grade 35 Taka. Only from 9th grade girls get a bigger amount. In comparison, a day labourer earned 30 Taka per day.
However, only few girls complete high school and it is not clear what other effects the stipend programme has had on the position of women. There is no clear evidence that marriages are delayed or more women found employment as a result of education (Raynor and Wesson 2006; Bates, Maselko and Schuler 2007).

Given the fact that the amount of money received as stipend is very low and does not even cover all the educational expenses, it could well be that the stipend money itself is not the only incentive for parents to enrol a daughter in high school. The stipend may be one factor, but other factors may be at work here as well; many parents may continue to send their daughters to school if they would not receive a stipend (S. S. Ahmed 2004:40, quoted in Raynor and Wesson 2006). The realisation that education may increase the chances of earning and, connected to this, the expectation that dowry demands will decrease when a girl is more educated may be possible factors. Dowry demands decrease when a girl has had some years of higher education as it opens up the possibility for a job. This is an important reason why poor parents increasingly send their daughters to high school nowadays. On the other hand, as Ahmed and Naher (1987: 196) have pointed out, most husbands do not like their wife to work after marriage and there are hardly any employment opportunities for women in rural areas anyway. Ahmed and Naher (1987: 189) also pointed out that it was difficult to find a bridegroom if a girl was over-educated or over-qualified, as the bridegroom would have to be at least as qualified.

Finally, higher female participation as such, or rather gender parity in higher education does not necessarily mean that women will participate in society on an equal basis. At the structural level, the key question is whether increased participation in education contributes to a structural change in society towards greater gender and class equality. Obviously, this is not easy to measure. The quality of education is an important factor here, as well as the availability of employment opportunities after education. If the education system, the educational programmes, and curriculum are designed in such a way that class and gender inequalities are explicitly challenged, then education could be a factor in challenging traditional power structures. Inspiration for this could be taken from the life and writings of the famous Begum Rokeya Sakhavat Hussain, born in a landlord family in a village in Rangpur in 1880. She advocated gender equality and to realise her ideals she set up a school for Muslim women around the turning of the 19th to the 20th century. Similarly, if there is no sustained increase in opportunities for women on the labour market, women will remain dependent on their husbands for their livelihood.

---

72 A survey by CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) in 2003-04 found that two-thirds of the extremely poor children did not get stipends, but 27 percent of the well-off children do. Besides, the children received at least 30 percent less than what they should have (Daily Star 24 February 2006, “Stipends end up in wrong hands” by Inam Ahmed). The same has also been reported in other reports. Girls in Jhaigrup told me similar experiences.


4.5 Women’s reproductive rights and empowerment

Another much debated issue that relates to women’s empowerment concerns population control versus women’s reproductive rights. Population control and family planning programmes have had an influence on marital relations and on women’s position in the household. Since the 1960s, (then still East Pakistan) family planning programmes, or rather population control programmes, have been carried out by the government of Bangladesh, mostly pushed by foreign donors (the latter portraying doom scenarios of projected population explosions in poor countries). An increasing population would be a threat to the world’s resources and with that to the wealth of the foreign donors. For a long time, these population control programmes in Bangladesh were ineffective. True to the norm that men have jobs and provide the family income, most village level family planning workers were male, while it was mostly women who were expected to use contraceptives or undergo sterilisation operations. But, given the purdah restrictions on women’s contact with outsiders, these family planning workers could reach only men. Many people claimed that family planning was against Islam and men proved particularly hesitant to use contraceptives, as they feared that it would affect their masculinity and potency. As a result, not many people used contraceptives. However, this did not mean that women were not interested in contraceptives. On the contrary, women were very eager to know about contraceptives and several women used contraceptives secretly without the knowledge of their husband (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980:76).

Under pressure from foreign donors to make population control programs more effective, the government introduced incentives in cash and kind for sterilisation operations in the early 1980s. National and international women’s organisations highly criticised these programmes for being coercive. Studies showed that a disproportionately high number of people who were sterilised were from the poor classes, obviously attracted by the incentives (Hartmann & Standing 1985, 1989). Women’s organisations also demanded that the issue should be reproductive rights, as opposed to population control, giving women the right to free and informed consent and a choice on which contraceptive to use. Incentives were incompatible with this as a form of coercion and against the principle of free and informed choice. Moreover, programmes for family planning should include good health care and improvement of living standards. From the 1980s, NGOs started

---

75 Feminists have emphasised that there is a distinction between population control and family planning. See for instance Hartmann 1987. Population control programmes are top down and serve the interest of the state, while family planning implies women’s agency, a woman’s free choice over her body.

76 For a detailed critique of population control programmes in Bangladesh and its scandals see Betsy Hartmann and Hilary Standing (1985 and 1989) and Farida Akhter (1992).

77 Reproductive rights, as opposed to population control, has been the main spear-point of feminists at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. 179 governments agreed to ensure women’s ability to control their own fertility. In Bangladesh some of the organisations that were in the forefront to demand reproductive rights as opposed to population control were Nari Pokkho, a women’s campaigning group and UBINIG, an independent research organisation. Internationally the Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights has been active since the 1980s in voicing feminist demands regarding reproductive rights.
taking up family planning programmes and some of these included mother and childcare in their programmes. Instead of male workers, NGOs employed female workers to motivate women to use contraceptives. Propaganda campaigns for a ‘happy family of four’ through family planning were carried out via radio and television and religious leaders were mobilised to issue statements that the use of contraceptives was not against Islam. Also owing to increasing land scarcity and a growing penetration of the market, the use of contraceptives and family planning is now commonly accepted and Bangladesh has become one of the success stories of family planning programmes. But with the main responsibility for reproduction resting on women’s shoulders and patriarchal notions of male virility, the responsibility for the use of contraceptives still rests mainly on the shoulders of women.

The developments described above created choice and space for women to negotiate their influence in decision making within the household and the family. In chapter 8, I will look at what these changes say about women’s empowerment, what has been women’s role in these changes and to what extent they have contributed to a structural change in women’s position.

4.6 Summary and Conclusion
The social transformation that is taking place in Bangladesh can be noticed in several fields. First of all, there has been an increasing influence of Islam, including political Islam. The fatwas issued against women and violent attacks against secularist forces are an expression of this development. More or less parallel to this there have been four other developments that have had a major impact on the position of women. Firstly, the development of the garments industry from the late 1980s in which thousands of women found employment. Secondly, the growing influence of NGOs that target rural women in their (now mostly microfinance) programmes. Thirdly, increased efforts by the state since the 1990s to make secondary education more accessible to girls. Lastly, the wide acceptance of family planning practices in contrast to the 1970s when these programmes were highly unsuccessful. Each of these developments created choice and space for women to negotiate their influence in decision making within the household and the family. The state and local authorities often found themselves caught between these contradictory developments.

In the next two chapters we will see how the economic and social transformation of society has taken shape in Jhagrapur itself since 1975. In chapter 5, changes in class and gender relations will be analysed with regard to the class composition, land and labour relations. In this context microfinance programmes and dowry will also be discussed.

5 Jhagrapur revisited, class and gender

The following chapters provide empirical data on how economic and social transformations in Bangladesh have taken shape in Jhagrapur, in particular with regard to class and gender relations and women’s agency. They provide the background against which the questions on women’s land ownership and empowerment will be examined. I will start with my findings with changes in class relations as a result of the Green Revolution. The classification of the households in the village is not only needed to analyse the impact of the economic transformation on land and labour relations, but also to analyse class differences between women with regard to their relation to land and their empowerment. A separate section will deal with the gender bias of the Green Revolution and its consequences for the economic position of women. Specific attention will be paid to women’s income opportunities and experiences with microfinance programmes because these are mostly aimed at ‘poverty alleviation’. The lack of income opportunities and the failure of microfinance programmes to bring poor women out of poverty provide another argument for securing women’s land ownership through inheritance and the distribution of khas land; land will give women more livelihood security. Finally, as a concrete example of the gender and class consequences of the economic transformation I will discuss the rise of the dowry system.

5.1 Changes in class relations

Compared to other regions in Bangladesh, the Green Revolution was introduced rather late in Jhagrapur and its surroundings. Only in 1985 four deep tube wells were installed in the village; this enabled an extra paddy crop per year. A few rich peasants had taken the initiative to apply with the government’s IRDP programme for these deep tube wells and, in order to fulfil the conditions set by the government they had formed four groups of ten (mostly rich) peasants to each manage one of the four deep tube wells. To operate the power pumps for the deep tube wells, electricity was also installed in the village. With this development a lot of other changes occurred in the lives of the people transforming not only agriculture, but the economy and society as a whole impacting both class and gender relations.

In order to analyse the impact of the economic transformation on class relations in Jhagrapur we need to assess the changes in class relations. For that purpose, I compared my data from 1975 and 1998/1999. To classify the 419 households in the village in 1998/99, I used the same criteria that we used in the earlier study for the sake of comparison (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 81-93. The main criteria were control over means of production and production relations, as measured by ownership and de facto control over land, hiring in or out of labour power, and subsidiary incomes. These criteria largely determine the level of self-sufficiency of a household and the degree to which the labour power of a household is exploited, or a household exploits the labour power of other households. In case there was doubt about the class position of a household, other criteria, such as household size and possession of machinery and other means of production were taken into
consideration as well, and villagers were asked for their opinion. It should be noted that it is important to measure de facto control over land and not only ownership of land. Some households own only little land but they have a considerable amount of land in sharecrop or lease. On the other hand, households with a good amount of land may have mortgaged most of their land due to various circumstances. For instance, in 1999 one household owned only 2 bigha of land, but they had 19 bigha of land in sharecrop from one of the absentee landowners. Therefore this household has been classified as middle peasant. Another household had to sell and mortgage almost all their land and had become practically landless (see Box 5.11 in section 5.7). They have been classified as semi-proletarian peasants. To give an idea of approximately how much land is needed to be self-sufficient, in 1999 semi-proletarian peasant households (SPP) had less than one bigha, small peasant (SP) households had roughly between 1 and 6 bigha, while rich peasant (RP) households owned on average more than 15 bigha (3 acres). Middle peasant (MP) households rank between SP and RP households. One bigha of land produces roughly 10 to 12 maund (around 400 kilograms) of paddy per harvest.

Classification of peasant households

Semi-proletarian peasant (SPP) households are not in control of any or very little means of production and depend on selling their labour power.

Small peasant (SP) households do not have sufficient means of production to survive and next to cultivating their land they have to sell their labour power.

SPP and SP together are called Poor peasants (PP).

Middle peasant households (MP) generally own just sufficient means of production to be able to make ends meet.

Rich peasant households (RP) own a surplus of means of production, they hire in labour power, and sublet part of their land.


Capitalist Entrepreneur households (CE) engage in a wide variety of commercial activities next to the cultivation of their land. I added this class for the 1999 classification although it concerned only one household at that time.

I am aware of critiques regarding the method of classification that was used, particularly from the side of feminist scholars. They have argued that such a class analysis is too narrow as it deals only with class contradictions and ignores contradictions between the sexes (Beneria & Sen 1982; Mies 1988; Chen 1986; White 1992). Class is defined on the basis of means of production that are mostly owned by men, or under the control of men and the class position of a woman is mostly derived from the position of the male head of the family. I agree with this criticism, but nevertheless, for the sake of comparison, and for lack of other satisfactory
models of classification, I have used these criteria again. To include women implicitly in the classification I consequently use ‘peasant households’ rather than ‘peasants’, as we have done in the earlier study as well.

As we can see in Table 5.1 my findings show that the percentage of poor peasant households (SPP+SP) increased from 54 to 65 percent between 1975 and 1999. In other words, in 1975 a little over half of all the households in the village (54 percent) lived in poverty, but by 1999 this had increased to almost two-thirds of all the households (65 percent). Thus the percentage of peasants who had to work as day-labourers or find some other additional income for their survival had increased (Plate 17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Proletarian Peasant (SPP)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Peasant (SP)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Peasant (MP)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Peasant (RP)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlord (LL)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist Entrepreneur (CE)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is particularly striking that the percentage of semi-proletarian peasant households (SPP) has more than doubled from 20 to 43 percent, while the percentage of small peasant households (SP) has decreased from 34 to 22. Most likely many of the small peasant households had become semi-proletarian peasants. The only landlord in the village had died and his land had been divided among his sons and his widow who were mostly living in Gangni by 1999; they became rich peasants.81 Table 5.1 also shows that there are proportionally less middle and rich peasant households than in 1975, their percentages have decreased. This suggests that, on the whole, middle and rich peasant households are on the decline as well, but it should also be noted that seven middle peasant families, nine rich peasant families and the landlord family (and nine poor peasant families) had moved to Gangni or elsewhere; their households were not included in the survey.

80 In 1975 about 15 percent of the, mostly rich peasant, households were joint households. Now many of these joint households have split up into nuclear households. Apart from the increased population, this is the reason for the large increase of the number of households.

81 The landlord’s widow stays mostly with her three sons, but on and off spends time in the village, in particular during the harvest season. The sons visit the village regularly to manage their land. In neighbouring villages there are still some landlord families.
To examine these data further, I compared the class position of the households of 1975 to their class position in 1999. Table 5.2 shows the upward and downward mobility of all the households. 82 In total 49 percent of the small peasant households, 44 percent of the middle peasant households and 40 percent of the rich peasant households showed a downward mobility. In other words, these households had a higher class position in 1975. Only 11 percent of the middle peasant households, 15 percent of the small peasant households and 16 percent of the semi-proletarian peasant households had moved up since 1975.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobility</th>
<th>% SPP’75</th>
<th>% SP’75</th>
<th>% MP’75</th>
<th>% RP’75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upward by 1999</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same by 1999</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward by 1999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To calculate the mobility I have taken the 1975 classification of the households as the baseline. The 1999 class status of sons of households of 1975 who have set up their independent households between 1975 and 1999 has been compared to their father’s class status in 1975.

Three families who moved to the village after 1975 have not been counted here.

This is the household that has been classified as Capitalist Entrepreneur.
Thus the status of a large part of the households of all classes in Jhagrapur has declined, while a few households have moved upwards. It is also interesting to note that 84 of the SPP households and 59 percent of the rich peasant households have stayed in the same position. The largest mobility is seen among the small and middle peasant households, while the large majority of semi-proletarian peasant households have remained in poverty and more households have joined their ranks. Given the above results, it is surprising that many people in the village told me that their situation had improved, including some people from poor peasant households. My own observation that there was less starvation than in 1974/75 was in tune with that. So, how to explain these seemingly contradictory results?

The explanation should be sought in the changes that have occurred in land ownership and in the demand for agricultural labourers. On the one hand, landholdings had become smaller (see section 5.2), but on the other hand productivity of the land had increased (Plate 18) and there was an increased demand for agricultural labourers combined with higher wages (see section 5.3). Owing to these changes the classification results show a downward mobility, while many people said that their situation had improved. So although, on the whole, resources have reduced and more people had become dependent on daily wages or other income activities, people’s income had increased due to the higher productivity of the land, availability of work and higher wages.

The reason for the decreased landholdings that partly caused the downward mobility can be found in the inheritance system. Because the parental landed property is divided among the children after the death of their parents, the landholdings become smaller and smaller with the result that many households of the younger
generation do not have sufficient land to survive any more. Moreover, there is a growing tendency for joint families to split up. In 1975 there were 173 households in the village with a total population of 1017 persons and by 1999 there were 419 households with a total population of 1678. Thus there were more, but proportionally smaller households by 1999. Whereas in the 1970s, most sons initially stayed with their parents after marriage, many of them now set up their independent household soon after marriage, even if their parents were still alive and the paternal property had not yet been divided. (I will elaborate on the reasons for this later on.) Their households became landless, unless they had been able to purchase land or their in-laws had given them land. Some of them were sharecropping or leasing part of their father’s land and had other sources of income, but a number of them worked regularly or incidentally as agricultural labourer and have therefore been classified as poor peasants. However, in case their parents own land, their landlessness is only temporarily; they will get the inheritance share later. So, after the death of their parents their class position may go up again. Hence my data give only a temporary picture, a snapshot of a particular point in time.

If the above explanation for the downward mobility of households as indicated by the classification results is correct, it would mean that the class status of households of the new generations would have declined more than the old generation households. In order to examine this, I made a distinction between the 1975 households and the households that have been newly formed after 1975, the new generation households. If we compare Table 5.3 and 5.4 we see very different patterns of mobility.

| Table 5.3 Class mobility of new generation households as of 1999 (N=272) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Mobility % hhs                  | % SPP’75 | % SP’75 | % MP’75 | % RP’75 | % Total |
| Moved upward                    | 9        | 12     | 2       | 0       | 6     |
| Same                            | 91       | 31     | 40      | 51      | 52    |
| Moved downward                  | 0        | 58     | 58      | 49      | 42    |
| Total                           | 100      | 100    | 100     | 100     | 100   |


| Table 5.4 Class mobility of 1975 generation households as of 1999 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Mobility % hhs                  | % SPP’75 | % SP’75 | % MP’75 | % RP’75 | % Total |
| Moved upward                    | 33      | 20     | 26      | 4       | 21    |
| Same                            | 67      | 48     | 54      | 75      | 58    |
| Moved downward                  | 0       | 33     | 20      | 21      | 21    |
| Total (N=144)                   | 100     | 100    | 100     | 100     | 100   |

The downward mobility trend is much clearer in the new generation households. In total 42 percent of the new generation households have a lower class position than their parents’ household had in 1975 (see last column Table 5.3); they moved downward. Of the 1975 generation households, only 21 percent has a lower class position than they had in 1975 (see last column Table 5.4).

With regard to upward mobility, only 6 percent of the new generation households have a higher class position than their parents’ household had in 1975 (Table 5.3), whereas 21 percent (one-fifth) of the 1975 generation households have moved upwards (Table 5.4). So, most likely, many of the new generation households that broke away from landed households will first experience a downward mobility. Later in life, after the father or both parents have died, they will move up the ladder again when their parents’ property is divided. Hence lifecycle is a factor here.

If we look at the downward mobility of the different classes, we see that in all classes roughly half of the new generation households have moved down the ladder, while 91 percent of the SPP households have remained in the same class. In the 1975 generation, however, there is a clear class difference: a much higher percentage of the small peasants households (33 percent) have moved down (Table 5.4) compared to the middle and rich peasant households (respectively 20 and 21 percent), while the majority (67 percent) of the SPP households has remained in the same position. On the whole, the poor peasant households are clearly at a disadvantage, while the rich peasant households are at an advantage. Half of the new generation households and two-thirds of the 1975 generation of rich peasant households versus a large majority of the SPP households in both generations (respectively 91 and 67 percent) have stayed in the same class position. The majority of the rich have stayed rich and the majority of the SPP have stayed practically landless and their numbers have grown. These findings correspond to the findings of Atiur Rahman (1986: 86-92). Nevertheless, as many as 33 percent of the 1975 generation SPP households (mostly becoming small peasants) and 20 percent of the SP households have moved up the ladder. One factor here is certainly the inheritance/lifecycle. In 1974/75 households had also broken away from their parents before having received their inheritance share. Another factor is the increased value of land owing to the higher yields and extra crop per year. Although the cost of cultivation has also gone up, there are individual poor peasant households that have managed to improve their position and proved that this is not impossible. Some landless and poor peasant households have managed to purchase a small plot of land, which gives them an income for a few months of the year. Nevertheless, we should not forget that as a class the percentage of poor peasant households has increased from 54 to 65 percent of all the households as we have seen in Table 5.1. Van Schendel (1980: 296) has argued that “the

85 The data obviously show a static picture of two particular moments in time and should therefore be considered with some caution.
86 The total number of households in 1975 was 173, but 28 household heads have died and their sons have split up, and 1 household has moved out of the village.
“desirability and perceived possibility of upward mobility” is one of the factors that explain the absence of intra-peasantry class consciousness.

Apart from the inheritance/life cycle factor and the breaking up of joint families, there is another factor that plays a role in the decline of households. With the introduction of the Green Revolution the cost of cultivation has increased many-fold. Now peasants have to buy seeds from the market and these seeds need fertiliser and pesticides instead of the natural manure of cow dung; irrigation pumps need diesel, and peasants who do not have a share in a deep tube well or have a shallow tube well have to pay for irrigation water. Besides, many peasants do not have a plough and bullocks anymore; they have to rent a power-tiller to plough their land (Plate 19). This means that much more cash money is needed for cultivation nowadays. In 1998, I asked a few peasants to calculate the costs of paddy cultivation for one bigha. The estimates varied depending on whether labourers were hired in or most of the work was done by the peasant himself and the amount of fertiliser and pesticide used also varied considerably, with middle and rich peasants using far more. A middle peasant’s estimate was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost of paddy cultivation for one bigha in 1998 (in Taka)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hiring power tiller and labourers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harrow after sowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irrigation by shallow tube well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labourers for re-sowing empty places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fertiliser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pesticide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labourers for weeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(= approx. the price of 310 kilo paddy)

Earlier cultivation expenses were much less. Peasants used their own seeds left over from the previous crops, they only needed to buy fertiliser and there were no irrigation facilities. Only rich peasants hired in labourers while other peasants used mostly their own labour power. Now everybody has to hire labourers as the work needs to be done in a much shorter time span. Especially for poor peasants it is difficult to bear the high expenses for cultivation. As a result, they have to take loans and become indebted. Money lending is again on the rise. If peasants cannot obtain a microfinance loan, they have to resort to moneylenders who take 10 percent interest per month (adding up to 120 percent per year). If peasants are unable to repay their loans, their last resort is to mortgage their already scarce land, leading to further impoverishment and eventually potentially losing their land.

In 1999 there was a more diverse variety of subsidiary income sources compared to 1975. For instance, in 1999 several poor peasants owned a van (goods carrier
rickshaw or rickshaw and trading activities had increased, especially paddy trading. These sources of income have been facilitated by the improvement of roads. As rice production more than doubled, there are now four rice mills in the village. The mill owners are all rich peasants, as it requires large investments. Some poor peasant men are employed at the rice mills to load or unload and weigh the paddy or operate the machines and the rice mills give facilities to paddy traders who employ women to boil and dry paddy. Men from all classes are involved in paddy trade, they make use of the rice mills to process the paddy and sell the rice at a profit. But rich and middle peasants benefit more than poor peasants as they can afford to trade much larger quantities than poor peasants who lack the necessary capital to invest. There is a clear class difference here and the introduction of the rice mills has again led to a greater class inequality.

Most subsidiary income sources were still agriculture-related and on the whole there were not more households that had one or more subsidiary incomes than in 1975; only rich peasant household had expanded their subsidiary income sources. One of the joint rich peasant households with a rice mill had further diversified its income into various directions. They were involved in different kinds of commercial activities and they were jobholders as well; three of the five brothers and their wives were teachers. I classified this household as capitalist entrepreneurs (Box 5.1).

The introduction of irrigation has given rich peasants another income opportunity by hiring out the deep tube wells under their control or a shallow tube well or power tiller that they own. In this they are at an advantage as well. Moreover, the collective management of the deep tube wells has given some people the opportunity to appropriate even more money (Box 5.2).
Box 5.1 Capitalist entrepreneur joint household

This is the richest and most influential family in the village. The mother and three sons with their families live in the village, two sons live in Gangni where they own a big building and run a spare parts shop. In 1999 the mother told me: “Two labourers live with us permanently, one for the mill and one supervises the agriculture. Five other labourers come and work for us daily and one woman is our domestic help, she also cooks for us.” One of the brothers told me: “We have developed in different directions so that we do not depend only on agriculture; we also have jobs and do business.”

They own more than 100 bigha of land in the village. In the past they grabbed land from several other villagers. They had a brick factory in the village for several years (Plate 20 and 21) and were the first to grow tobacco. When they gave up the brickfield because it was not profitable enough they installed a rice mill on the land, the first rice mill in Jhagrapur. Apart from the commercial activities of the joint family, three of the brothers and some of their wives are teachers in various schools and colleges. They are said to have paid big bribes to get those jobs.

The eldest brother is the most influential. He has been elected as Union Council chairman twice; the third time he lost the elections by a mere 65 votes, but he won again in 2003. Some people praised him for advancing money from his own pocket to improve the road through the village. When the money sanctioned by the government came he got his money back. He moved to Gangni after being threatened by a group of ‘sontras’ (‘criminals’, ‘terrorist’, as underground party members are now usually referred to, following the government jargon); they tried to extort money from him. He comes to the village regularly in the daytime, but leaves again before dark. He managed to get the name of the college changed after the initiators had called it ‘Jhagrapur College’ (see also Chapter 6.7).

In 2007, the youngest brother won the bidding for the lease of the communal boro pukur (big pond) together with three others. He had a lot of money to invest and is making big money with fish cultivation of a very popular new variety of fish, which is marketed in Dhaka (see also Box 6.6).

Box 5.2 Irregularities with Deep Tube wells

The deep tube wells (DTW) that have been installed in the village can each irrigate 300 bigha of land. Landowners who are not a member of the DTW management committee have to pay for the DTW irrigation. This gave rise to irregularities and misappropriation of money. E.g. in 1999 I heard that the person in charge of the accounts of one of the DTWs, one of the village leaders, was caught by another
villager when he had claimed that the DTW irrigated only 60 acres of land and had pocketed the rest of the money himself. He denied when confronted with it and no measures were taken against him. On another occasion the DTW had to be repaired. This was to be paid for by IRDP, who had installed the DTWs. The same person made a false receipt of 50,000 Taka saying that the DTW had been repaired, claimed the money from IRDP and together with another committee member pocketed the money. On information of some villagers, IRDP came to investigate the matter. Villagers testified that the DTW had not been repaired, but after that they did not hear any more about the case. Most probably the culprits had bribed the IRDP officer. Several members of the management committee were in fact not interested any more in the operation of the DTW. They had bought shallow tube wells (STW) for themselves in the mean time and could make more money with those and with less hassle. An STW runs on diesel and not on electricity and can irrigate only 10 to 15 bigha. The charge for irrigation is 4 maund\textsuperscript{87} paddy per bigha against 3 maund for irrigation from a DTW. Irregularities also led to quarrels between the members of the management committee and the DTW was abandoned.

From the above it is clear that the economic transformation has been much more profitable for rich and to some extent middle peasant households while for poor peasant households the impact has been mixed. In the next sections, we will have a more detailed look at the impact of the economic transformation on land and labour relations.

\textsuperscript{87} One maund is 37.65 kilograms or 40 sheer.
5.2 Land relations

This section deals with land ownership of households. No distinction has been made between land owned by men and by women in the households here. Women’s ownership of land will be dealt with separately in chapter 7. This section serves to show the class dynamics of land relations while chapter 7 deals more specifically with the gender dynamics. Apart from changes in the distribution of the classes in the village, it is important to look at changes in the distribution of land. Table 5.5 shows the unequal distribution of land between households, both in 1975 and in 1999. In 1975, twenty percent of the households owned 60 percent of the land, while in 1999 they owned 72 percent of the land. This clearly shows the increasing concentration of land. These findings are in line with those of other researchers (Motiur Rahman 1994; Atiur Rahman 1986; FIAN 2003).

The landholdings per class show the same picture from a different angle (Table 5.6). In 1999, rich peasant households constituted a smaller percentage of all the households than in 1975 (respectively 15 and 22 percent), but they still owned 55 percent of all the land. Middle peasant households show a similar trend. Poor peasant households, on the other hand, constituted 54 percent of the households in 1975, but 65 percent in 1999, while their share of the land has remained more

88 In fact, the concentration of land is even higher than the figures in Table 5.5 indicate. Some twenty households (mostly rich and middle peasant) have not been included in this survey as they had moved out of the village, mostly because they had jobs elsewhere, were running a business, or were too scared to live in the village fearing extortion or attacks from so-called ‘sontrasi’ (criminals, terrorists, armed cadres of outlawed political parties). Most of these households still own land in Jhagrapur; they are absentee landholders. Some have given their land in sharecrop or lease, but others come to the village regularly to manage the cultivation of their land.
or less the same. Thus, rich and middle peasants had accumulated land by 1999, while poor peasant households had lost land. The gap between poor and rich had grown and poor peasant households had been hit the hardest by the economic transformation.

Table 5.5 Distribution of land among households 1975/1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of households</th>
<th>Percentage of total land owned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5.6 Distribution of land among the classes 1975/1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% hhs</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% land</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average land per hh.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average land p.p. (bigha)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5.6 also shows the average land holdings per household and per person per class. By 1999, the average landholding of all households had reduced considerably compared to 1975, but here also poor peasant households had been most impacted with their average landholding decreasing by two-thirds. However, since the size of households had decreased from an average of six members in 1975 to an average of four members in 1999, the average landholding per person gives a more realistic picture. The last row of Table 5.6 shows that the average landholding per person in the poor peasant class had more than halved while it had reduced by less than one-fourth for persons from the middle peasant class and by about one-sixth for rich peasants. An important reason for the reduction in average landholding per household and per person is the inheritance system. Parental land is divided among all the children after the death of the parents. However, given the class variation in reduction of average land holdings, the inheritance system cannot
be the only explanation. The average landholding of middle and rich peasant households had decreased to a much lesser extent because they also bought land over the years, while poor peasant households mostly lost land. Poverty forced many poor peasants to sell or mortgage part of their already scarce land. A compensating factor that needs to be taken into account is that the productivity of land has gone up with the HYV technology. This has clearly been more advantageous for middle and rich peasant households because they have bigger landholdings and have been able to accumulate more land.

There is another factor that plays a role in the greater class differentiation. In 1974/75 many poor and middle peasants could sharecrop land of rich peasants and landlords and so increase their income. About 14 percent of the land was cultivated in sharecrop (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 122). In 1999 sharecropping arrangements had become much less and partly made place for a system of short term land 'lease'. In a sharecropping arrangement, the amount to be paid to the landowner was half of the crop,89 so it was dependent on the yield and was to be paid in kind after the harvest. In a lease agreement, a fixed amount of cash has to be paid, independent of the output, and is to be paid in advance. Thus to lease a plot of land, a large amount of cash is needed beforehand and all the risk is for the tiller. Moreover, a sharecropping agreement was often for several years, but a lease agreement is only for one or at most two seasons. This change has been especially disadvantageous for poor peasant households as many of them cannot afford to pay a large sum of money to lease land at once and in advance of the yields of the land, unless they have made money on contract work (see further), taken a loan or received dowry money. Another system that has developed since 1975 is giving or taking land in contract. Like lease, land is given in contract only for one or two seasons. The difference with lease is that the sum paid for the contract is paid partly in cash at the time of making the contract and partly in kind after the harvest. Few rich peasants now give their land in sharecrop; most of them give land only in lease or in contract. Some of the peasants used to sharecrop land belonging to a big absentee landlord of a neighbouring village who owns 450 bigha, but not any more. One of the peasants told me in 1998:

\[ \text{Boro Mia (Big Lord) used to give a lot of land in sharecrop but now he gives it all in contract. He gets Tk 2000 per bigha per crop plus part of the harvest. He is also turning a lot of his land into pukur [ponds], that is much more profitable. He has 7 pukur for fish cultivation. From the fish alone he has a monthly income of Tk 40,000.} \]

89 Or one-third of the crop if the sharecropper had paid for all the inputs.
90 This is an old measurement. One maund is 40 sheer and equivalent to 37.33 kilograms.
91 The price rise was among others also a result of diversion of 5 percent of the world’s food grains to biofuel and speculation in food commodities since the start of the financial crisis. This price hike was clearly manmade as according to the FAO there was more than enough food to feed the world population. See: Anup Shah, Global Food Crisis 2008, available at http://www.globalissues.org/article/758/global-food-crisis-2008#Causesshorttermissuesandlongtermfundamentalproblems (accessed 14 May 2010).
92 Compared to other villages in the area foreign labour migration is limited in Jhagrapur. Quite a few other men have tried to go abroad but lost their money to cheating middlemen.
This is another trend that has developed. More and more peasants are digging fishponds on their agricultural land (Plate 22). Growing fish has become a more profitable business than growing paddy. All these developments are particularly advantageous for rich peasants but they have added to the impoverishment of poor peasants and some middle peasants as well.

Growing scarcity of land combined with intensification of agricultural production with high expenses for inputs and, consequently, a need for quick cash has had other consequences. The price of land has increased manifold. In 1975 one bigha of agricultural land in the village cost about Tk 2000-3000, but by the early 1990s it had gone up to Tk 20,000; the price of land had increased ten times. By 1998, land was Tk 50-60,000 per bigha. After the global financial crisis started in 2007, and with the sudden rise in food prices worldwide in 2008, the price of land also shot up. As a poor peasant explained in August 2008:

The price of land is now Tk 200,000 to 250,000 per bigha. Last year it was only 80,000 to 100,000. It shot up because the price of paddy shot up to Tk 800-1000 per maund, now it is Tk 450 to 500. Before it had even come down again to 350 to 400 but the price of land did not come down again.

So the worldwide rise in food prices was also felt in the village and this poor peasant connected the increase in the price of land to the increase in the price of paddy. In the same period a middle peasant woman gave a different explanation:

Since two years land has become very expensive, because people go to bidesh [abroad]. Otherwise we would buy land for Tk 50,000, now it is 200,000 or 300,000 per bigha. They bring black money from bidesh. They say you give me land, I will give so much money, even more. Here in front of our house this land is 500,000, the person who bought it is in bidesh. He has bought it for Tk 13000 per katha a few days ago to build a house. Elsewhere land for cultivation is 200,000 per bigha. Especially since last year prices have gone up very much. Last year paddy was Tk 400 per maund, now it is 800, 900. Munish [day labourer] was Tk 50, now Tk 100. Everything has doubled since 6 months, one year.
Labour migration to foreign countries may play a role here as well. In 1998/99 only four men were working abroad, by 2009 some ten persons had gone (and many more tried but were cheated by middlemen). The money they send back home is often invested in land or a house. Moreover, with the growth of the village population and the splitting up of households more and more agricultural land on the fringes of the village is converted into homesteads. This increases the pressure on agricultural land even more and is another reason for the increase in land prices.

With the increased price of land and growing scarcity, land conflicts are still endemic, but poor peasant households who have been robbed of their land have started fighting back (Box 5.3).

---

**Box 5.3 Poor peasants take land back**

In 1974/75, Wahid told us that a gang of notorious landgrabbers in Jhagrapur had stolen some 35 *bigha* of his family’s land; this had happened before the Bangladesh liberation war. The landgrabbers must have found out that Wahid’s family did not have all the proper ownership documents of their land. Wahid’s family still had enough land left to be self-sufficient. In 1998, when I started my fieldwork for this study, the family told me that they finally had all their land back. They had won the court case and there had also been a *lathi* (long stick) fight. But in 2006 their land was again disputed. The case turned out to be very complicated and I can only tell here what I heard from both sides. This time, their land ownership was challenged from a different side: some poor peasant families who were offspring from two of Wahid’s father’s brothers. They claimed that the latter had not received their rightful share of the 88 *bigha* that their ancestor owned and that all that land was in the possession of Wahid’s father. Abed, the great-grandson of one of Wahid’s father’s three brothers told me in 2005 that he had studied all the court documents and discovered that Wahid’s father had taken all of his grandfather’s land and also the land of his grandfather’s cousin’s sister in 1956. They had since lived in poverty. Wahid’s family, on the other hand, claimed that their father had bought the land of two of his aunts and had been given the land of two other aunts who had died without having any children. They also claimed that their father had given a share to the daughter of one of his brothers (the other party’s grandfather’s cousin’s sister, whom I mentioned above) and that she had claimed that she should be given more, but that she had no right to the rest of their father’s land as it had been bought and gifted and therefore was not part of his father's inherited ancestral land. Moreover, Wahid’s family claimed that Abed’s grandfather had sold all his land, including part of Wahid’s father’s land. But Abed’s party also claims that Wahid’s family has sold land that should belong to them. The conflict culminated in a big fight in which sickles and big knives were used. Wahid’s mother
told me in 2006 that in July 2005 the other party had brought ‘son-tras’. Wahid’s sister showed me big scars all over her body; she and other women and men from the family had fought back hard. Several people on both sides were wounded and had to undergo treatment for several months. During Wahid’s family’s absence the other party started cultivating part of their land and also started a court case. In 2009, I heard from Abed’s party that the court case was still running; in the meantime they had occupied all the land that they claimed and had divided it among the families concerned. They claimed that Wahid’s family has no records of the land that their father had bought and been gifted, and that they could not show any documents and had only obtained it by word of mouth.

In June 2010, while in Holland, I read in the Daily Star online of a dramatic turn of the case. One of the claimants, Nurul Huda, had been killed: “On the fateful night his rivals stabbed him to dead during an arbitration.” I have yet to hear the story from the villages. This case also shows how women’s inheritance shares can be manipulated.

5.3 Labour relations

Another major change that came about with the introduction of the Green Revolution is that, with one more paddy crop per year, there was much more work for agricultural labourers which resulted in a shortage of agricultural labourers and an increase in daily wages. In 1974/1975, the daily wage for male labourers was Tk 5, while the price of one kilo of rice was Tk 6. In 1984, the Agricultural Labour Ordinance set the minimum daily wage for agricultural labour at 3.28 kilograms of rice or its cash equivalent. By 1985, wages had gone up to Tk 10, then equivalent to about 1.5 kilo of rice, so still much below the minimum wage set by the 1984 Ordinance. In 1998, the daily wage was Tk 30, equivalent to around 2.25 kilograms of rice and only around 2006, with Tk 50, the daily wage arrived more or less at the set minimum wage level. By 2008, a daily labourer earned Tk 80-100 as the price of rice had shot up like everywhere else in the world due to financial speculations.

In the 1970s, apart from the paddy, jute or sugarcane was cultivated on some of the land and in the winter season pulses or other crops like mustard seed, but the work for agricultural labourers was very limited. As a consequence, there was a lot of starvation in the lean season. Many poor peasant families did not even have one full meal per day. Now there are two or three paddy crops per year instead of one or two (depending on the quality of the land) and as a result the lean season is shorter. Yet, although there is more work for agricultural labourers, the number of households that depend on hiring out their labour daily has also grown due to population growth and pauperisation. As we have seen before, the percentage of poor peasant households in the village that depends on daily wages fully or partly...
has gone up from 54 to 65 percent. Nevertheless there is a shortage of agricultural labourers in the peak seasons. What a rich peasant told me in 1999 is an indication for this:

“Before munish [day labourers] came to ask for work, nowadays we ourselves have to come and ask the munish and they come only on contract [see further down], otherwise they don’t come.”

Another indication for the shortage of agricultural labourers is that nowadays labourers from outside the village come to Jhagrapur during peak seasons to work as day-labourers (Box 5.4). By contrast, in the 1970s, landless peasants from Jhagrapur regularly went to some other districts for work for several months, mostly around harvest time, as there was not enough work in the village. Landless peasants still go to other districts to work temporarily as seasonal migrant labourers when wages are higher there, but this is mostly in the lean seasons when there is not enough work in Jhagrapur. (Box 5.5)

Box 5.4 Labourers hired from other villages during peak seasons

The labourers who now come to Jhagrapur during peak seasons for work either come from neighbouring villages that have no deep tube wells for irrigation, and therefore not an extra paddy crop, as some of them explained to me, or they come from an area where a third paddy crop is not possible as the soil is more sandy. These labourers gather at dawn at certain places in the village where landowners come to hire them for the day. After work, they return to their own villages. Some migrant labourers from sandy river areas in a neighbouring district work on contract and stay for the whole
harvest season which lasts about one month. They come with their buffalo carts to transport the paddy from the fields to the homestead as most rich peasants don’t have a bullock cart any more (Plate 23). Since most people now plough their land by power tiller there are only few bullocks, buffaloes and carts left in the village. Usually, some 10 to 12 buffalo carts come from outside the village during harvest time for the November harvest of the rain-fed paddy crop only. The irrigated paddy crop that is harvested in April/May cannot be transported by these buffalo carts because the fields are too wet and muddy due to the irrigation. At that time, the paddy is transported by labourers on their head. The same goes for the paddy harvest in the rainy season in August.

Box 5.5 Labourers from Jhagrapur go for work to other districts in the lean seasons

“Yesterday my brother left for Faridpur to plant garlic. He went with 10 other men from our para. They phoned some others who were already there and heard that they get Tk 150 per day and 4 times food and that there is a lot of work, so they left yesterday. I also went six or seven times, but I don’t want to go any more. Last time was very bad. After we worked three days we heard from villagers there that the boss was bad, so we left, but boss refused to give any money. We had no money for the bus, so we walked back; we walked for a few days. A lot of women work on the land there; they work with their child on their back. It was very cold; they keep a plate with fire in front of them to keep warm. Their men don’t work, only play cards; they send their women for work.”

Siddiqui, a poor peasant, 6 November 2006

An aspect of the labour shortage that has a more cultural and gender dimension needs to be mentioned as well. The prevailing gender ideology in Bangladesh is that women do not work on the land, unlike in other Asian countries such as India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This drastically reduces the number of available labourers. Despite the shortage of labourers, women did not join the ranks of agricultural labourers, even though there are hardly any income opportunities for women. In a few other areas in Bangladesh women reportedly do work on the land now.94 This may be an indication that as a result of the economic and social transformation that is taking place, the norm that women do not work outside the house may eventually change in Jhagrapur as well. To change a given culture, norms and values, is an often slow process; ideas are often fixed in people’s minds and do not

94 E.g. Chen (1990: 215) mentions that women work as agricultural labourer, but she does not give any details.
change overnight as they require a change in people’s mindset. It may be only a matter of time before women in Jhagrapur start working on the land as well.95

There are several reasons for the labour shortage in the peak seasons. The first reason is a direct consequence of the intensification of agriculture. The period in between two paddy crops is much shorter than before. Soon after the harvest of one crop, the land has to be prepared again for the next paddy crop. This means that more labourers are needed during a shorter period. Another reason is that there is a growing tendency in all classes to engage in off-farm work (although most of the work is still agriculture-related). Fewer landless peasants want to work as agricultural day labourer and if they do, they want to work on contract. They prefer to drive a rickshaw or ‘van’ (Plate 24), or do some petty trade. That way they are more independent and can often make more money and besides, they are not dependent on the agricultural seasons, but they can work the whole year round. In 1998, about 13 people owned a van; the price of a new van was 4000 Taka. This was even before the road through the village was metalled, but they operated on the main road just outside the village, which was already metalled. By 2009, the number of poor peasants who owned a van was manifold; they had often bought their van with a loan from an NGO. Even though the competition was much more, all the van drivers assured me that driving a van was better than working as a day labourer as they could earn money any day.

Not only has the introduction of the Green Revolution resulted in a greater demand for daily labourers and a labour shortage in the peak seasons, there has also been a shift in the nature of wage labour and in production relations. Nowadays, most labourers in the village work on contract basis in the peak seasons rather than on a daily wage basis, as they can earn more that way (Plate 25). In 2009, daily wages were Tk 100 per day in the peak season, but labourers who worked on contract could make an average of Tk 200 to 250 per day. In a contract arrangement, four or five labourers form a group and make an agreement with (preferably) rich peasants to do a fixed job such as harvesting or threshing paddy for a mutually agreed price. In the mid 1990s threshing machines have appeared in the village and they are mostly owned and operated collectively by small groups of labourers. Abdul, a small peasant, was one of the first persons in the village to buy a threshing machine, which he now shares with four other labourers. Both landowners and labourers generally prefer a contract arrangement: with one extra cycle of cultivation, the landowners need to get the work done much faster and it is equally in the interest of the contract labourers to complete the work as fast as possible so that they can move on to the next contract and make more money. Often during the harvest season I heard labourers start their threshing work long before daybreak. Labourers working on contract make much longer hours than labourers hired for the day. As

95 The question is whether this would be progress for women or not. If they could earn a decent daily wage it would be an improvement, but only if they would be relieved of some tasks in the household; otherwise it would just mean an even heavier workload for women.
one middle peasant complained: “day labourers work very little nowadays, they usually stop working around 2 o’clock in the afternoon.” (But he didn’t mention that they usually start working at daybreak, which means they work eighth hours per day). The contract system has improved the bargaining position of labourers. This is also reflected in the complaints of some middle peasant households that it is very difficult to get labourers nowadays. “Labourers don’t want to work for choto lok [literally: small people], only for boro lok [big people], then they can earn more”, a middle peasant woman complained to me one day.
Yet, another reason for the scarcity of labourers in the peak seasons, is the availability of land for lease. Labourers who work on contract have some capital available after the harvest season, which enables them to invest in the lease or mortgage of land. This means that they are only partly available as labourers, as they also have to cultivate their leased land. As we have also seen above in the case of rickshaw drivers, there is a trend that poor peasants prefer to work independently which is often more profitable for them (although also more risky in the case of crop failure). If they have the chance they prefer to cultivate their ‘own’ plot.

Finally, the shortage in daily labourers is also caused by the shorter time span in which agricultural operations have to be performed. People in Jhagrapur used to have a system of exchange of labour. Peasants, often within the same bangsa [lineage], but also e.g. neighbours, exchanged labour during the peak season. In groups they would harvest paddy or transplant seedling, moving from one peasant’s fields to the next. That way they did not need to hire in labourers. Although in decline, this system was still in use in the 1970s but has now almost totally disappeared. Due to the time pressure, as there is only a short time between the paddy crops now, all peasants are busy with getting their own field ready and therefore have to hire in labourers. Even poor peasants now sometimes hire in labourers although they try to do as much as possible by themselves. As a result, collectivity is disappearing more and more and instead there is competition in finding day labourers.

Box 5.6 Abdul, an energetic hard working poor peasant

When I first met Abdul in 1998 he and his brother were still living jointly with their parents. Abdul was married and had built a small house next to his parent’s house. They had no children yet. Things were going well, their situation was better than before. Abdul was a hard working labourer. “I bought a threshing machine several years ago in Chuadanga [a neighbouring district] for 2000 Taka. Later I shared it with four others because I couldn’t do all the work myself. We work on contract. For threshing 80 katha paddy we get 5 katha paddy.” There are now about 15 threshing machines in the village.”

He further told me: “We have 2 bigha of land and we have taken 8 katha of land in sharecrop and 2 bigha in lease for 3 years for 10,000 Taka per bigha per year. We also have 3 cows. Before we had more land, but when I was little my brother and sister were very ill and then my father sold 0.4 bigha to Hanif [a middle peasant] for 3,000 Taka. Now the value of that land is Tk 30,000.”

But in 1999, Abdul had an accident. At the start of the harvest season in November he badly hurt his ribs while installing the threshing machine and he could not work during the whole season. This became a big loss for him and his family. Moreover, he had to spend several thousand Taka on doctors and medicines for which he had to mortgage some of his scarce land. In 2002 Abdul’s injury was still
bothering him. "I cannot work fully any more. That is why I’m not happy. I and my brother both separated from my parents as I have two sons now while my brother has no children and my parents are also only with the two of them, so we are more persons and that gave tensions. Besides I cannot work so much any more due to the accident a few years ago. If I would be healthy I would have shanti [peace]."

In 2005 Abdul started catching fish for fish traders; that was less strenuous work. He had never fully recovered from the accident and stayed rather weak. If he had been able to continue like before the accident their situation would most probably have improved, but now their daily struggle for survival continues.

Labour shortage and the increasing demands of labourers may be important reasons why there is a growing trend to use labour-saving technologies such as power tillers for ploughing and rice varieties that need less weeding. A few rich peasants have even started renting a tractor to plough their fields. Only few peasants plough their field by plough nowadays, but some peasants have bought a plough and oxen again to save on the increasing charges for rent of a power tiller. Because bullocks have been mostly replaced by power-tillers, there has been resulting decline in livestock, and consequently a loss of demand for boys from poor families that used to be employed as cowherds. It also means that there is hardly any natural manure from cow dung that can be used as (more environmental friendly) fertiliser or fuel. Despite the improved opportunities for income earning and higher wages, labourers who depend on a daily income remain extremely vulnerable. If they fall ill or get an accident and they cannot work for some time, they do not have any income and their situation deteriorates. The case of Abdul illustrates this very well (Box 5.6). So, although daily labourers have more work for higher wages than before, and consequently less acute starvation than in the 1970s when many landless peasant households had hardly one square meal a day, inequality between rich and poor households has increased further and the situation of the latter remains very vulnerable. Many landless peasant households still do not eat one full meal a day in the lean seasons, let alone three meals a day.

For elderly landless peasant households, such as Ali and Fatima (Box 5.7) it is even more difficult to survive; there is hardly any employment for them because of their age. Like Fatima, a few women are forced by poverty to go to the rice mill regularly to winnow rice. They do not earn any money but they get a kilo of rice at the end of the day. The rice mill is their last resort when they have nothing to eat. In 1998 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina introduced a pension scheme that provides Tk 100

Katha is not only a land measurement but also a weight measurement. 80 katha is acc. to Abdul 374 kilos (10 maund), paddy, so 5 katha is roughly 23 kilos (25 seer). So they got one-sixteenth share of the paddy that they threshed. Some other labourers told me that they get 4 katha for 80 katha paddy threshed; apparently they got a lesser deal than Abdul.
per month to the ten poorest and most vulnerable aged persons in each ward (lowest administrative level, consisting of a few villages). Of these ten, at least five must be women. The Union Council decides who receives a pension. In 1998 Fatima got such a pension, but only for 3 months.

Box 5.7 Ali and his wife Fatima, an old landless peasant couple

Ali and Fatima live in a part of the village that is not visible from the roadside. On the roadside one can see mostly nice brick houses of rich peasants and at first glance it seems like there are not many poor people living in the village at all. But as one gets to know the village more, a very different picture arises. Hidden away from the main road there are groups of houses of landless families, among them Ali and Fatima. Most of the time Ali has no work: “Who will take me, I am old and cannot work so much any more”, he sighed one day in 1998 when I visited their house. “My wife gets boisko bhata [pension] now. She gets Tk 100 per month, but for only 3 months. After that they will give it again to someone else. In the morning she has gone to the rice mill to winnow rice so that we will have something to eat today. She will get leftover broken grains and hopefully some extra rice…No she doesn’t get money, only once in a while a little.”

Another day in 2002, during harvest time, I met Ali when he had just returned from gleaning the paddy fields. He showed me a basket with some ears of paddy: “I picked up this leftover paddy from the fields. We have borrowed 1500 Taka and have to return it in paddy, 1.5 times more than we borrowed. We are not allowed to repay in money. We have 0.5 bigha of land, but we have given it in share-crop as we have no money to cultivate it. We have two sons and 5 daughters. Our sons are separate since a long time, they don’t take care of us. They also have no land, only some land in sharecrop. My father and grandfather did not have any land either. My grandfather was married to the sister of Ashraf’s grandfather [a rich peasant].”

When I asked Ali why they didn’t have any land if his grandfather was married into such a rich family he replied: “Ekta karon ache [There is a reason]. At that time there was no land settlement yet. That came only after my grandmother died. If she had still been alive she might have gotten some land.”

---

97 According to a recent CPD-UNPA report the pension scheme reaches only 44,500 of the estimated several million of older people who live in extreme poverty (Kabir M. and M. A Salam 2001).

98 This is common practice of mahajans (moneylenders). The price of paddy is lower after harvest, so if they get their money repaid in paddy, they get actually even more in return because they will sell the paddy only after the price has increased again. So, Ali actually has to repay even much more than 1.5 times the amount that he borrowed. A rich peasant told me in 2002: that since 5 to 6 years there were again more mahajans practices. Even small peasants started lending out money in this way, e.g. money they earned with contract labour or dowry money.

99 Ali refers here to the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 by which the landlord system was abolished and tenants were given titles to the land they were tilling.
5.4 The Green Revolution and the position of women

In contrast to the increased work for agricultural labourers, income opportunities for women have become even less than before. With the large increase in paddy production rich peasants had much larger surpluses. To process the rice and to increase possibilities for trading rice, four big peasants each installed a rice mill in the village of which the first one was installed in 1985. Soon villagers also started going to one of the rice mills to get the paddy husked for their own consumption. The dheki [traditional foot pedal] used for of husking rice and jata [hand operated grinding stones] (Plate 26) disappeared from almost all the houses. Initially some households kept their dheki and jata to husk or grind small quantities for their own use, but by 2010 I did not notice these any more. For poor women, the introduction of the rice mills has been disastrous. Many of them earned a meagre income by husking paddy and grinding wheat for rich families, but the rice mills have taken away their work. While the Green Revolution has given more opportunities to men, it has taken away opportunities to generate an income from women. In Jhagrapur poor women have not yet started working on the land as in some other areas in Bangladesh (Agarwal 1994; Centre for Policy Dialogue 2000), but it may be only a matter of time for poor women as they have hardly any alternatives.

Interestingly, White (1992: 76) describes how the rice mills have also given women (and men) an opportunity to go into small rice husking business in which paddy is bought and processed to husked rice for re-sale. In Jhagrapur, however, I have only come across men who are involved in rice business. Men from all classes are involved in rice trade, but only rich and to a lesser extent middle peasants can afford to trade on a large scale as they have money to invest. As parboiling and drying paddy is considered women’s work, traders employ women to do this work.
at the premises of the rice mills. The women at the mills work 7 days a week, each one for a particular rice trader, their *malik* [boss]. They are provided with a hut on the rice mill premises to live in during the period that they work there. One of them told me one day in 1999 when I visited one of the rice mills:

> We are 5 women working here at this mill now, I have been working here longest, since three years. I earn 500 *taka* per month\(^{100}\), and get clothes twice a year. Now and then I also get rice, oil, soap, etc. from the *malik*. Every month my 500 *taka* are exhausted, I have to give quite some money to my mother. My father is still alive too, but they are poor, they have only 11 *katha* of land [approx. 0.5 acres]. I was married before, but my husband threw me out after 1 month. He wanted 15.000 *taka joutuk* [dowry], but we didn’t have that.

Only then did I realise that all these women were from other villages. They all came to work there because they were poor and they had no husband to take care of them and to ‘protect’ them. Rather, they had to provide for others at home and some of them had children whom they kept with their parents. Not a single woman from the village was full-time employed at any of the rice mills (I will discuss the reason for this in detail in the next chapter).

Whereas things got worse for poor peasant women, the rice mills reduced the workload of rich and middle peasant women; they were relieved from some of their tasks. And so, the Green Revolution has led to a greater class differentiation between women as well. As Amena, a rich peasant woman told me while she was watching her drying paddy:

> I am very happy; I have much less work now. I don’t have to husk paddy or grind wheat any more. During harvest time I have a lot of work such as boiling and drying the paddy, but that is only for about one month. After that it is quiet again. We can sit much more and gossip.

This relates mostly to middle and rich peasant women, in particular women whose children have grown up and these women have benefited from the introduction of the rice mills and other machines. The rice mills have actually made life easier for them as their heavy task of husking paddy and grinding wheat has now been taken over by the mill.

---

\(^{100}\) 500 *taka* is approximately $10. One kg. of rice cost around 12 *taka* in 1999 and a male day labourer earned an average of 35 *taka* per day, approx. 3 kilo rice. These women earn only 17 *taka* per day. However, they get free rice, but only for their own consumption, not for their family members who are in their home village. In 2007, the women earned 700 *taka* per month while the price of rice was 18 to 20 *taka* per kilo, so in fact their purchasing power had decreased.

\(^{101}\) *Poushani* is a system similar to sharecropping land. An owner of a goat or cow gives her animal to another woman to be taken care of. If the animal gets offspring half is for the woman who has taken care of it and the other half for the owner. For middle and rich class women this is an extra source of income (sometimes without the knowledge of the husband if she keeps the animal in her father’s or brothers’ house). For some landless women it can be a means of survival.
The economic transformation has not only led to greater class inequality but also to a greater gender inequality. The day-to-day survival of poor peasant women has become more difficult and they have become more dependent on the income of their husbands and sons or on handouts from other households. Especially for landless widows and divorced women it is very hard to survive; Shahnaz is one example (Box 5.8).

Latifa, a landless widow, is another example. She complained to me one day when I met her on the road:

I cannot go for the dinner in commemoration of the father of my daughter in law today because I have no good sari, it is all torn and I don’t want to embarrass my son. I don’t have anything, yesterday I didn’t cook because I had nothing. It is very difficult to survive. I have 5 katha [0.25 bigha] of land but I have given it in mortgage last year to buy tin sheets for my roof, it was leaking very much. I don’t have any work; there is no more dheki and jata work, nor any other work. I only have to depend now on what others give me. You see, I just got a little rice (showing rice which she had tied in her sari), they (nodding in the direction of the house of a rich distant relative) have given it.

Box 5.8 Shahnaz, struggling hard for survival

Shahnaz is a young widow. Her husband died in the early 1990s. He was sick and they had no money for treatment. Her two sons were about 8 and 10 years old when I started my fieldwork in 1998. She told me then: “I would have liked to marry again, but it is not possible with 2 children, nobody will take my children.” She lives in the same homestead as her widowed mother in law and her divorced sister in law. They each have separate households and no land. Her eldest son herds their own cow and goats which they got through a poushani [share raising] arrangement, the youngest herds a middle peasant’s buffalo in the neighbourhood. They have one more goat in poushani and will get half of its offspring. During my fieldwork they sold their cow and bought a small plot of land. Shahnaz works very hard and takes whatever work she can get. She works for several rich peasant households, whenever they call her for some work. When there is no other work at all, she goes to one of the rice mills to winnow rice. All she gets for her work is one kilo of rice and some broken grains. During the tobacco harvest she is lucky if she is called to help prepare the tobacco for curing. In 2000 Shahnaz was accepted as a (temporary) Ansar (paramilitary guard) to oversee the upcoming elections. “Seven people were selected from Jhagapur, I was the only woman. They had advertised for it on the radio, I heard about it. I had to go to Meherpur to register for it. I had a 3-week training in Meherpur. I liked it. I got only food and accommodation, no money, but for the
day of the election I will get Tk 300 [in 2000 this was equivalent to 8 to 10 days working as a day labourer]. I could even join as Ansar permanently”, she told me. (See the next chapter for a follow up on Shahnaz.)

Since the 1990s peasants have started cultivating tobacco\textsuperscript{102} and occasionally a few women are hired to help prepare the tobacco leaves for curing (Plate 27). Generally, household members do this work themselves, but at times, poor women like Shahnaz are hired for a few days for this work.\textsuperscript{103} Other temporary employment possibilities for landless women are in food for work programmes for road improvement, but such schemes are infrequent. Moreover, unmarried young women will often refuse this kind of employment, or are not allowed by their parents, as it would reduce their chances for a good marriage match. Another possibility for women to make money is to raise animals, such as chicken, ducks, goats or cows, but this needs investments, which poor women can hardly afford unless they get a goat or cow in \textit{poushani} (Plate 28). Raising animals can be risky, especially chicken are difficult to raise as they attract diseases easily, so many poor women do not see this as an option for them. Another possibility to earn some money is making mats and khetas (bedcovers), but there is only a limited demand for these as most women make them themselves. In 1999, six women told me that they sold a kheta that they had made for Tk 100 to 150. Some women have no other option than to sell their bodies for sex from time to time. With the disappearance of the dheki and \textit{jata}, the demand for domestic help has also decreased considerably. In the 1970s, thirteen poor women worked as domestic labourers in middle and rich peasant households, which, apart from husking rice and grinding wheat, was practically the only form of employment available to them. In 1999 only nine women still worked occasionally as domestic labourer.\textsuperscript{104} Women told me that they were hardly asked for domestic work anymore.

Most rich peasant households manage the work by themselves and only on special occasions, when there is a lot of extra work, may they call on one of the poor women to help.

\textsuperscript{102} The Capitalist Entrepreneur family was the first to start cultivating tobacco in the 1990s, gradually others followed when they realised it was profitable business. Most tobacco in the area is bought by BATC (British American Tobacco Company). Most of the tobacco quality is first class and is exported. Some peasants received a license from BATC, they get their inputs from the company and BATC buys the tobacco from them.

\textsuperscript{103} Before selling the tobacco, it needs to be dried and all the leaves have to be hung one by one on bamboo poles which are then hung in small curing sheds. Inside there is a construction of pipes to circulate the hot air from a fire that is lit on the outside and that needs to be kept burning for days until the leaves have dried. The curing needs a lot of wood and other fuel such as rice straw and it produces a lot of smoke and pollution of the air.

\textsuperscript{104} Like before, women who do domestic work in other households generally do not get money for their work. They get paid only in kind – two meals for a full day’s work, and if they are lucky they are allowed to take home some food for their children. If they work regularly for a household they may also receive a sari once a year.
On the other hand, women from rich and middle peasant households complain that nowadays they can hardly get any women to work for them and that the women whom they do employ are often unreliable and demand too much, like money, saris, food, etc. Labourers cannot be controlled as much as before. Not surprising, then, that labourers have started demanding more since, as in the 1970s, women who do domestic work for others still get nothing but one or two meals, they do not receive any money for their work. When I pointed this out to one of the complaining rich peasant women, she replied: “Ghrihosto phakhi (fraud, trick) dei, kintu
“[A well-off person plays tricks but a labourer plays double tricks.] This is a sign that labourers have become more independent and cannot be ordered around as easily any more. If there is a choice, they go where they get the most out of it. So if Shahnaz can help preparing tobacco for curing for which she gets a daily wage, she will not go to work in a rich peasant’s house for which she doesn’t get any money, even if they have asked her to come. Employers do not have the power over labourers any more to force them to work for them and, of course, they do not like that. They would like the poor to work for them whenever it suits them and only do what they say and want, but times are changing.

Poor peasant women have no chance on the very scarce job market in rural areas, even if they have had an education. In 1999, seven middle and rich peasant women had a job, mostly as teachers. Two poor peasant and two middle peasant women were employed as teachers in NGO schools in the village, but these schools had again disappeared a few years later. Apart from such scarce NGO jobs, no job opportunities are available for poor peasant women; they do not have money to pay a bribe or a middleman to obtain a job. The only chance for poor women to get a job is in the garment industry which has come up since the 1990s, but such a job means that they have to leave the village since almost all garment factories are concentrated in and around Dhaka and a few other industrial centres (Plate 29). Nevertheless, this is increasingly becoming an option. For a long time Dhaka was very far from the village and no one had gone there except a few rich peasants. While it was impossible to reach Dhaka in one day in the 1970s, and even in 1998 it was still very difficult, now with improved roads and transport facilities, there a direct bus from Gangni that can reach Dhaka in about 7 or 8 hours. In 2001 Saida, a

Plate 29 Sewing t-shirts in a garment factory in Savar near Dhaka. The majority of the employees are women.

lābhor duī bar phakhī dei.”
poor peasant woman, was the first from Jhagrapur to work in a garment factory. She had joined her cousin who worked in a garment factory in Dhaka from a neighbouring village. Her two brothers and their wives followed her five years later. A few other poor women and men also followed her, but by 2008 the number of people from the village working in the garments was still rather low, at most about twenty. Saida turned out to be very enterprising. While in Dhaka she married a man of her own choice, a middleman who mediates for jobs abroad. In 2006 her mother told me that her daughter was working in the Middle East as a domestic worker. Her husband had arranged her job and he himself found work in Iraq a few months ago. Saida is the first woman from Jhagrapur who has migrated abroad; she is one of the very few women abroad in the entire area.105

So, there is very little wage work for poor peasant women and microfinance schemes do not help them either (see next section). Except for a few enterprising poor women who have been able to manage their situation quite well, the large majority has to live from hand to mouth, sometimes even literally picking up whatever grains they can find in the fields. Forced by the situation, most of the poor women ignore gender norms and moral values. They have to take any possibility to survive and, consequently, they risk being stigmatised as ‘bad’ women. There is a great urgency for poor women to find alternative means of livelihood.

5.5 Microfinance and ‘poverty alleviation’

Since the mid 1990s, when NGOs first entered the village, there is the option of microfinance as an alternative possibility for women to generate an income. I have not studied microfinance activities in the village in-depth, but during the survey in 1998/99, the women were also asked whether they, or another household member, participated in a credit group, whether they had taken a loan and if so on what it had been spent. Their answers and my observations indicate that microfinance does not provide an alternative for poor women’s livelihood.

For a long time there were no NGOs active in Jhagrapur; they entered the village only around the mid 1990s. When I started my fieldwork in 1998, Proshika was the main NGO in the village. Their programmes focussed mostly on women, but Proshika also organised men’s groups. The Grameen Bank came to the area only in 1997 (Box 5.9) and BRAC had just stopped its credit activities in Jhagrapur (Box 5.10). Apart from microfinance activities, BRAC and Proshika also ran primary schools in different parts of the village for several years. Around 40 percent of the middle and poor peasant households were involved in a savings group during the time of my 1998/99 survey. Almost half of the poor peasant households had both the wife and the husband involved in a samiti (savings groups), while middle peasant households had generally only one member (more men than women) in a samiti. Less than 15 percent of the rich peasant households were samiti members. As some rich peasant women remarked: “That is not for us, that is only for the poor”, clearly indicating that they definitely did not belong to that group. Rich peasants do not need microfinance as they can easily get a (much bigger) loan from a bank if they need to; they have
enough land as collateral. As is the experience elsewhere too, (Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, 1996; Goetz and Sen, 1996) I have observed that although most microfinance groups are for women, the loans taken by women are mostly used by their husbands or sons, except for the loans that are just used for food for daily consumption.

Box 5.9 First meeting of a new Grameen Bank group in Jhagrapur

In 1999 I attended the very first meeting of a new Grameen Bank samiti, as the credit groups are called (Plate 30). One of the poor peasant women had told me about the meeting and had shown me a paper with the rules that the Grameen Bank worker had given her with instructions to read them carefully before coming to the first meeting. She read them for me: keep your house clean, cultivate vegetables and eat them yourselves, repair the house when it is broken, no more than 2 children, send the children to school, etc. (the Grameen Bank’s 16 Decisions). On the day of the meeting, two male Grameen Bank workers came from the Gangni office to conduct the meeting. They told me that the Grameen Bank is in Gangni Thana since 1997 and that they have six workers there, no female workers. This was the 3rd group that started in Jhagrapur. At the beginning of the meeting, all the women had to salute and yell out “Grameen Bank Zindabad Zindabad” [Long live Grameen Bank]. After that, one of the workers explained all the rules and procedures and what would be the benefits for the women. The women were also instructed to get a signboard to put up in their part of the village. “The office doesn’t provide it, it costs 60 Taka, so if you all share, it is only 3 Taka each.” Towards the end of the meeting all the women had to deposit some money into their group account. The Grameen Bank worker explained that they would put their group money on a bank account for 5 years and the group would get 8.5% interest. The women of the new group were told that only after they had saved some amount they would be allowed to take a loan. Then, finally, everybody had to salute again and yell out “Grameen Bank Zindabad Zindabad”; meeting over.

Against the background of the presence of a number of different NGOs competing with each other for customers, the signboard and slogans are obviously to imprint their membership and loyalty to the Grameen Bank in the minds of the women and to show its presence in the village. But there is more to this. Many people are members of several NGO samitis and take loans from all the NGOs, sometimes they even take a loan from one NGO to repay a loan from another. Lamia Karim (2008) argues that NGOs forestall this by demanding faithfulness to their organisation to prevent such practices. The signboard and slogans should be seen in this light as well.
Undoubtedly, some people have been able to invest their NGO loan in a useful way. For instance, as mentioned before, some poor peasants were able to buy a van, which gave them a daily income, or a means to lease land or cultivate leased land. Although the idea is that women are given a loan to start a business, I know of only one woman who has taken a loan and invested it in a small shop and of one woman who bought a sewing machine. They are both divorced women. Quite often loans are not used for the investment purpose that they were applied for. Several people in the village have used their loans from NGOs for a different purpose, including for consumption, house construction or house improvement or even dowry. In addition, NGOs often do not have the capacity or motivation to check properly whether a loan has indeed been used for the purpose it was given for.

Microfinance has become a debt trap for quite a few poor peasant households who manage to obtain a loan. It is often difficult to repay their loan, at least the first few instalments. In fact, this makes women more dependent on their husband or sons because the latter have to provide the money for the repayment for which the women are responsible. If they cannot meet their repayment deadline, they are shamed and have to suffer the consequences such as harassment by other group members, which leads to severe tensions for them. It happens regularly that a loan is taken from one NGO to use the money fully or partly to repay a loan from another NGO, thus leading only to further indebtedness. Interestingly, the reverse also happens sometimes. I heard of a few people who took an NGO loan and used it for a money lending business. They lent the money out to someone else against a much higher interest rate, in some cases as much as 10 to 15% per month, the same usurious interest rate that rich peasant moneylenders demand. So these clever people manage to turn their loans into profit the easy way (provided that

---

106 BRAC and the Grameen Bank demanded weekly repayment of a fixed percentage of the loan, starting from the week after they have taken the loan. This hardly leaves the people any time to generate an income. But Proshika demands monthly payment, this is the reason why many people shifted from BRAC to Proshika.
their creditor is able to repay the loan), not shying away from extortion practices that they have previously suffered from themselves.

It is obvious that microfinance is not serving the poorest households. NGOs also admit that they cannot give loans to the poorest as the risk that they cannot repay is too big. This has also been confirmed by other studies (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Mallick, 2002). Especially for widows or divorced women, microfinance is no option. Many of the women complained: “How can I participate in a *samiti*, where do I get 5 *Taka* every week for *kisti* (instalment), from where do I get money?” Most of them have no male member in their household who can work as daily labourer to repay the weekly instalment. The claim that microfinance is a programme for poverty reduction and women’s empowerment is untenable as the poorest women are excluded.

There have been many saving groups in the village but most of them did not last for more than one or a few years. Usually when people have received a loan and repaid the amount they quit. Many people also told me that their *samiti* (savings group) had fallen apart because the members started quarrelling among themselves; the person who kept the accounts did not do it properly, or some members did not repay their loans at the expense of others. This is at least partly the result of the system of making the group members responsible for each other’s repayment. Instead of promoting cooperation and solidarity among the group members, it creates divisions and fights. In one case, a man from a men’s *samiti* ran away with his lover without having repaid the Tk 10,000 loan that he had taken; indicating that group members run the risk of losing their savings instalments. Some people also dissolved their *samiti* when they realised that they were actually paying much more than the 10 percent the NGO workers had told them. They realised that they had to repay a certain percentage interest over the full amount of the loan every week for the whole year instead of over the remaining balance, while the full amount actually reduced by each weekly instalment. This has also been reported elsewhere and it has been calculated that in fact NGOs charge 30 to 32 percent, even going up to 50 to 60 percent actual interest on their loans (Karim, 2008; Kelkar, 2004). In an unusual case, BRAC had withdrawn from the village because some of the members of their credit group had plainly refused to repay the loans that they had taken. BRAC has not been able to handle the case (Box 5.10).

My observations in Jhagrapur show that, at least for the village, the success of microfinance programmes is highly exaggerated. No household in the village has come out of poverty as the result of microfinance. Microfinance programmes can in fact never be a structural solution to poverty as they do not tackle the structural causes of poverty that lie in the unequal distribution of resources and power. As long as these causes are not removed and until women of all classes have equal economic and social power, they will remain excluded and kept quiet with rhetoric and palliative programmes implemented by NGOs and the state.
In 1999 several people complained to me that they had deposited money in their BRAC samiti, but that they never got their money back. BRAC had dissolved the group. I decided to visit the BRAC office in Gangni one day to find out what had happened. The manager told me their side of the story: “We have problems there like we have had nowhere else like that. There were 2 big samitis there, 70 to 80 members, all women, but since about one year we are inactive in the village because most people refused to repay their loans. They still have to pay back about Tk 1.5 lakh altogether.” The manager confirmed that there are indeed a few people who still have to get their deposited money back, but according to him not more than 8 people and not more than about Tk 6000 altogether. He showed me all the papers with names and amount mentioned. People owed BRAC money, varying from Tk 800 to 4000. The manager continued: “A few times we tried to hold a meeting in the village to solve the problem, but then only the people who still have to get money back came. How is it possible for us to give them their money back, while others still owe us so much money? What will the head office say? Tk 150,000 not paid back!” He was at a loss for what to do about it.

5.6 Impact of global connections
Agricultural transformation and its impact on society are not limited to the above. Apart from the growing landlessness which has turned more men and a few women into day labourers, increased value of land, an increasing number of absentee landholders, and the changes in gender relations (that I will deal with in the next section), there are a few other changes in the village since the 1970s that have to be mentioned as they have had an impact on the culture and social relations. With the cultivation of HYV paddy, a new phase of globalisation has penetrated rural Bangladesh which has not only transformed agriculture but also society as a whole and has led to a growing commercialisation of society. All agricultural inputs have to be bought from outside the village now and with increased output has come a growing market penetration of the rural areas. Peasants have become dependent on seeds, fertilisers and pesticides produced by national and multinational companies, and this has led to the destruction of traditional knowledge such as preservation of seeds, using natural manure, and crop rotation. Multinational companies have penetrated deeply into the rural economy. The dependency on the corporate world has increased even further with the introduction of biotechnology and genetically manipulated seeds and plants that have made their way into Bangladesh. Under the guise of increased production and “freedom from hunger”, agriculture has become totally dependent on industrial corporations maximising their profits.107

Peasants now grow mostly paddy and less other food crops, such as pulses, which they used to grow in the winter season. This has resulted in a less varied and
nutritious diet and, as a consequence, in increasing health problems, especially of
the poor who cannot afford to buy pulses from the market. An increasing number
of people suffer from tumours, many of them had an operation and several have
died. People told me that this did not happen before and I also never heard of such
diseases in the 1970s. Some people relate the appearance of these health problems
to the use of fertilisers and pesticides needed for HYVs. Often peasants use even
more fertilisers than needed which has led to the fertility of the soil going down:
while yields initially doubled after the introduction of the HYVs, people now complain
that they have decreased again. People also complain that the taste of food items
has reduced significantly and that they nowadays eat khali \textit{bis} [literally: nothing but
poison. \textit{Bis} is also used to indicate pesticides, which they know are poisonous.
Several people have killed themselves for a variety of reasons by taking pesticides.]

Migration to foreign countries is another phenomenon that is related to globalisa-
tion. When I started my fieldwork for this study, four middle peasants had migrated
to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. By 2010 some ten men and one woman had migrated
abroad, mostly to the Gulf States and Malaysia, and five men had returned in the
mean time. Still, migration abroad is rather low in Jhagrapur compared to other
villages. In fact, many more people have tried to get a job abroad, but most of them
were cheated by middlemen who took a lot of money without actually ever deliver-
ing a job abroad. The possibility of foreign migration has given rise to a new form
of exploitation with this time mostly rich peasants as victims. Altogether, people in
the village have lost millions of Taka to middlemen. For instance, Rahman, one of
the rich peasants lost most of land and is now mostly doing paddy business told
me in 2008:

In total I lost Tk 600,000 to three dalals [middlemen] and sold 8 \textit{bigha}
of land for all my expenses. I had to go to Dhaka a few times, stay in a
hotel there, etc. I came in contact with two of the middlemen in Dhaka
through some contacts of relatives but later I could not trace them any
more. The third middleman promised to return the 1.5 \textit{lakh} I had given
him, but I never got it. I can’t do anything about it, I am ruined now.

Like Rahman there are many more men who have lost large sums of money, and
not only to get a job abroad; some men, including poor peasants, lost money in the
same way to get a job within Bangladesh.

The penetration of the market and transnational companies can also be noticed
from the commodities that are now common goods in the village. Whereas only a

\footnote{Monsanto and Cargill are the biggest transnational companies promoting such products. Monsanto
controls three-fifths of the seed production (Anup Shah, http://www.globalissues.org/article/758/global-
food-crisis-2008#Causesshorttermissuesandlongtermfundamentalproblems). The disastrous experience
of cotton farmers with Monsanto’s BT cotton in India, leading to huge indebtedness and suicides of farm-
ers, is a telling example. More than 17,500 farmers a year have committed suicide between 2002 and
2006 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmers%27_suicides_in_India Raj Patel 2008 Stuffed and Starved,
The hidden battle for the world food system. Melville House Publishing).}
few people had a radio and a bicycle in the 1970s, televisions and motorcycles are now common commodities for the rich. Moreover, the influence of commercialisation and the media that has penetrated more through television, can be noticed in the daily life of the people, in particular the middle and rich classes. People’s lifestyles are changing. Not only have commercial goods penetrated Jhagrapur, but with it also the specific gender ideology of women as consumers and beauty models. The gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation has strengthened this kind of gender ideology.

5.7 The dowry system and its impact
The rise of the dowry system is a concrete example of the consequences of the economic transformation for gender and class relations. It has had a tremendous impact on the situation of women and of poor peasant households with daughters and for households with sons it has become a new way to accumulate money. Dowry has also mistakenly been connected to inheritance and has in several cases been an obstacle for women receiving their inheritance share. What impact has this had on the position of women and their agency? In this section I share some of my observations and findings on dowry in Jhagrapur. In chapters 7 and 8, I will further discuss the impact of the dowry system.

In 1974/75 the practice of dowry (joutuk or dabi, as villagers usually call it) hardly existed in Jhagrapur. Sometimes people talked about gifts that had to be given to the bridegroom, such as a bicycle or a watch, but they did not call this dowry and it was mostly restricted to rich peasant families. At that time the term joutuk (dowry) was never used in the village for these gifts to the bridegroom. In 1974/75 neither dowry, nor the Muslim practice of mohr were problems. Mohr is a sum of money or golden jewellery, which the groom’s family gives to the bride (Plate 31). In 1985,
When I first revisited Jhagrapur, poor people complained that their condition had become worse due to dowry. A landless widow told me that she had to pay Tk 2000 dowry to marry off her daughter. ‘Where do I get so much money’, she complained. Another landless family had to give a cow as dowry for their daughter’s marriage. By 1998 dowry had become common practice in all classes and the demanded dowry sum has increased steadily and exponentially. As a rich peasant woman told me:

On the one hand it is now better for women, they now have more courage; on the other hand it is worse for women, dowry has increased very much. For my daughter we will now have to give at least Tk 50,000 plus a Honda motorcycle. Poor families have to pay at least 20,000. Otherwise the bridegroom will ask: ‘Am I worth nothing?’ and he will beat his wife. For most people it is only about money.

Most people in Jhagrapur claimed that dowry demands started in the 1970s, around the time of my first stay in Jhagrapur. Selima, a rich peasant widow, had a different opinion, she claimed: “Dowry started when my eldest son was a little boy.” He was born “in the same year as independence from the British”, thus around the time of Partition in 1947. Some villagers related dowry to a demonstration effect, or to the surplus of girls on the marriage market. Other villagers explained the increase in the practice of dowry in economic terms; they linked it to increasing landlessness and unemployment and so dowry was a way to get money. A few blamed the girls themselves for it; they said girls had lost their value due to love relationships they engage in. When I asked whether boys also lost their value, the answer was: “Boys never lose their value.” Given the patriarchal norms and values this was not a surprising reply.

Some villagers argued that dowry stands for a girl’s inheritance share, but I argue that dowry cannot substitute inheritance. Dowry is given to the bridegroom or his family and they are generally the ones who control it. There are numerous examples of the wife having no say in the use of the dowry money, although there are also couples who decide together what to do with the dowry and some women used dowry as an argument with their husbands to set up their own independent household. Two women told me that their parents had given a piece of land as

108 Both Ahmed and Naher (1987) and Kabeer (2000) state that dowry demands started in the urban rich classes and fully emerged only after 1971, but that incidents of dowry had occurred in preceding decades. So this corresponds to what most people in the village told me.

109 Selima’s statement is in line with the findings of Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1971:272) who reported dowry cases in upper class Muslim marriages as early as the 1940s. These may be the exceptional cases that Ahmed and Naher (1987) and Kabeer (2000) refer to.

110 After some anti dowry notifications had been put up villagers told me that people now do not talk about dowry any more but about dan kora (giving a gift) and they give money secretly if it is a big amount. When I asked people whether dowry had been given or taken for their daughter’s or sons marriage, some of them quickly said: “no we didn’t give dowry, we only gave out of happiness with the marriage while a several others told me the truth hesitantly, adding: “You’re not going to tell the police, are you?”

111 Saira Rahman Khan (2001; 90) also found that court cases against dowry are rare. She reported that only two cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act had been heard in the High Court between 1991 and 1996.
dowry and registered it in her name. In these cases, this is actually not dowry but giving the daughter her inheritance share in advance because it is clearly registered as her property. Most of the time, dowry is not given in the form of land, let alone registered in the name of the daughter.

Nowadays, only few marriages take place without dowry being given and dowry has become a serious problem for poor peasant households with one or more daughters. By 2009 a poor peasant family had to pay at least Tk 15-20 thousand dowry; middle and rich peasants had to pay much larger sums. Several people complained that Bangladesh has become a ‘nongra desh’ (dirty country) and that people have become very ‘hingsa’ (jealous, malicious). People know that dowry is forbidden by law, but they feel helpless. “If we say that we won’t give dowry, they will just go for another girl” is an often-heard complaint. Others comment that if they do not give dowry their daughter would be beaten up. I have not heard of dowry cases that have been taken to court. People are not willing to start a case as they feel it is not in their interest. Their main concern is that their daughter is married off in the best possible way to a bridegroom who can provide her with a secure and happy future and who will provide the family with a higher status.

Box 5.11 Abdulla and Nazma have five daughters

Abdulla and Nazma are poor peasants. They used to be quite well off with their 12 bigha of land but over the years they have become practically landless. One day in October 1999 when I was doing the survey they told me: “We used to have 12 bigha [4 acres] of land, but now we have only 1 bigha left to cultivate. We have given some land in mortgage, the rest we sold. We had to get our five daughters married. The first daughter we married off about 20 years back. We had to pay 500 Taka dowry. For our other four daughters we paid respectively 1200, 5000, 8000 and 6000 Taka. We have not been able to recover from these expenses. Our youngest son is still with us, but our two eldest sons set up their own households after they married. We have no more income from their daily labour and we do not have enough money now to cultivate the land. Our sons married long back, they did not take much dowry, only about 500 Taka.” When I asked them more about the land that they had mortgaged they replied: “The papers are with P. [the person who had taken the land in mortgage] in the neighbouring village.” They did not remember exactly when they had given their land in mortgage, nor when they would be entitled to get it back. Apparently, they already regarded their land as lost forever. Moreover, they are involved in a land case since 10 years. As Abdulla told: “My mama [mother’s brother] has taken 7 bigha of our land. That case has cost us a lot of money, so our situation deteriorated further. Now we are in need, we just borrowed 4 maund paddy (160 kilo, costing about 1000 Taka). We have
Bad management related to illiteracy may have been an additional cause of their poverty, but there is no doubt that had there been no dowry demands for Abdulla and Nazma’s daughters, they would have been in a better situation.

Starting a case against a prospective bridegroom’s family does not enhance ones chances on the marriage market. Instead, parents try to negotiate the best possible deal. For poor families, the choice is severely restricted by their financial situation and often determined by the height of the dowry demand. There are women who have been married to men who are divorced, or to an older widower or a man who already had one or two wives, as in those cases less or no dowry was demanded. Other girls have been married to boys whose parents urgently needed a woman to work in their household and therefore did not demand any dowry. In such cases it is always the woman who has to bear serious consequences if no dowry has been paid for her marriage.

Dowry is an important cause of impoverishment for poor families with daughters; it can completely ruin a family. Abdulla’s family is only one example (Box 5.11). The case of Abdulla and Nazma may be extreme, but unfortunately they are not alone in this. Many other families have told me that they had to mortgage or sell land or animals to meet dowry demands and by doing so entered a downward spiral. Poor peasant families generally do not have the means to save money for their daughters’ future marriage like many middle and rich class families do nowadays. The latter enter into various kinds of saving schemes that are now available where they deposit money monthly. As a middle peasant explained:

Monthly I give Tk 200 to a saving scheme for my daughter. She is 2 years old now. After 10 years she will have Tk 50,000, so the money has more than doubled by then. That money can be used for her marriage.

Some poor peasant families manage to raise a cow or goats, often in poushani. This provides them some security once they get offspring; they can sell the animal for a daughter’s marriage or in case of calamities. Yet, most poor peasant families cannot afford to invest this much money; they mostly depend on daily wages and live from hand to mouth. Obviously there is the other side of the coin: families with sons that

Reports about dowry-related violence against women and dowry deaths appear regularly in the media. As early as August 1985 the New Nation, a daily newspaper, reported that in Gangni and Meherpur region 100 women had committed suicide in 10 months. Non-payment of dowry was mentioned as an important reason next to poverty, chronic disease and family feuds.
can take advantage of the dowry system. Families from all classes demand dowry, but whereas rich and middle peasant families use the dowry mostly for investments e.g. to purchase, lease or cultivate land or to pay a broker for a job, poor peasant families often use the dowry for consumption or to repay a loan as those are their most urgent needs. In one case, it turned out that the bridegroom of a landless peasant woman needed dowry to repay the dowry sum to his previous wife whom he divorced. When the parents of the bride could pay only part of the amount on the wedding day, the bridegroom threatened to cancel the marriage. Immediately the parents had to borrow money from relatives and then the wedding continued. They had not been aware that the bridegroom had already married once before.

Dowry has also given rise to increased physical violence varying from harassment to physical and mental torture to even deaths of women. Dowry related violence is increasingly reported in the media from all parts of Bangladesh, but I have not heard of dowry deaths in Jhagrapur. This does not necessarily mean that they have not happened. At least nine women in the village have committed suicide and three women have been killed; I could not find out whether any of these were dowry related. But women have been harassed for dowry; one woman was thrown out by her husband after 1 month, as he wanted Tk 15,000 as dowry, but her parents did not have the money. One small peasant woman told me in 2009:

My son is khub harami [doing very forbidden things]. He started asking for Tk 20,000 dowry from his wife and sent her to her father. He told her that she is not allowed to come back if her father doesn’t give the money. She went to her sister 6 days ago and has not yet returned.

Box 5.12 Bibi, trapped by a rich peasant

Bibi, daughter of a landless peasant, married a rich peasant from Jhagrapur whose first wife had died. “For Bibi we did not need to pay any dowry”, her mother told me. “After the marriage my husband and sons constructed a brick house for her husband. We did not ask for any wages; even if he had offered we would not have taken it. We thought we were lucky, but then when my daughter got pregnant her husband forced her to get an abortion. The second time the same thing happened, she had to go for an abortion. But when she got pregnant a third time we refused to get her an abortion. We promised to take care of the baby ourselves, no matter whether it would be a boy or a girl. Three months after the baby girl was born the construction of the house was completed. Then this man just sent my daughter away and took another wife…; that was about 8 years ago. Since then she lives next to us. Her daughter’s father has never paid a single penny for her, nor has he ever given her clothes or anything. My daughter is struggling hard to feed her daughter and
herself; she has to do whatever work she can get, whenever others call her. He is a boro lok [literally: a big person, meaning a rich person], isn’t it? At least that is what people say…” Bibi’s mother ended sarcastically. They had just been used by this rich peasant as free labour and for his sexual pleasures. When Bibi was of no more use he just dumped her. Bibi and her family fell into his trap because they could not afford any dowry.

Apart from physical violence, the dowry system has also given rise to a new form of structural violence (Box 5.12). Bibi’s case can be called a modern form of slavery and a new form of structural violence. Women whose parents have no means to pay a dowry for their daughter’s marriage become an easy prey of men who use them for their sexual pleasures and as free labour; they exploit not only these women but even their family members as well and when they have had enough they just dump the woman again.

In a few cases dowry been a source of power for women as they could turn it into their own advantage and used it to improve their economic situation. When parents are landless there is no land for a daughter to inherit, but if dowry is given for the daughter’s marriage and she manages to convince her husband to invest it in land, she herself also benefits. As Parul, a young woman who was married to a landless peasant in 2007 told me: “Joutuk mababer kosto, amader bhalo” (“Dowry is a burden for parents, for us it is good”). Her father had died when she was little and her mother had saved Tk 20,000 for her daughter’s dowry from raising cows, goats and chicken. With the money the young couple had bought a cow and taken 12 katha of land in lease.

The empowerment aspect that dowry can have for a woman in some cases is also illustrated by the fact that a few women found an interesting way to reverse their dependency and show their dignity. For instance, Zarina who had just been married told me in 2002: “Yes, I have bought a husband.” when I asked her whether they had paid dowry. So instead of complaining and making herself a victim of dowry she turned dowry from a means of subordination to the bridegroom into an act of asserting her agency and taking control.113

So, while dowry has become a big burden for parents with several daughters, it can be an asset for their daughters as it gives them space to negotiate with their husband to use the dowry for their common benefit. However, this should not be taken as a justification for the dowry system as such. Dowry is a source of impoverishment, harassment and serious violence against women. Women are tortured and even killed by their husband and in-laws if they are not satisfied with the dowry they receive. On the whole, the dowry system has had far reaching

113 Similarly some mothers commented about dowry: “Do I have to sell my son? I won’t do that.”
negative consequences for women. Instead of giving dowry, a better option would be for parents to give a plot of land registered in their daughter’s name. So, rather than an argument for dowry, I am making an argument for giving women landed property and equal property rights, including the right to control their property themselves. Besides, as Agarwal (1994) suggested, if managed collectively by a group of women, it would mean real empowerment and a true change in gender relations.

5.8 Summary and Conclusion
The process of economic transformation in Bangladesh since 1975 has led to a greater class and gender differentiation at the village level as well. The classification of the households in Jhagrapur on the basis of a survey conducted in 1998/99 shows that the gap between poor and rich peasants has further increased. The percentage of poor peasant households had increased from 54 percent in 1975 to 65 percent in 1999. Although there is less starvation than in 1975, many of the landless still do not get a full meal per day in the lean season, let alone three meals. More peasants have become (near) landless and turned into wage labourers and land ownership is concentrated in even fewer hands. This greater class differentiation has to be attributed to fragmentation of land due to the inheritance system and to indebtedness leading to loss of land through mortgage or sale. The increased cost of cultivation after the introduction of the Green Revolution, the shift from sharecrop arrangements to a system of short term land lease, and the exponential growth of dowry demands are main causes of indebtedness. Although more people have been turned into wage labourers there is a labour shortage in peak seasons. This is mostly due to the fact that the time span in which operations have to be done is much shorter than before and because poor peasants prefer to work independently, for instance as rickshaw or van drivers or doing petty trade.

The shortage of labourers has not prompted women to become day labourers as has happened in other regions. Except in tobacco curing, I have not seen or heard of women who work as daily labourer in agriculture; the patriarchal norm that women do not work outside the house is still propagated. The greater class differentiation can also be seen between women. Middle and rich peasant women have been relieved from the heavy work of husking rice and grinding wheat with the introduction of the rice mills, but it has robbed poor women from their most important source of income without new or other opportunities to earn income. It is true that the economic transformation has given more income opportunities to poor women in urban areas, mainly in the garments industry, but not to rural poor women.

The economic transformation has also led to a greater gender differentiation. The social status and value of women has decreased as they have been further pushed out of the production process, while it has given men more opportunities for income earning.
I have argued that there is a relation between the gender specific nature of the agricultural transformation and the exponential growth of the dowry system. Dowry has become an easy way to acquire a large sum of money needed, for instance, for agricultural inputs or for the lease of land. It has also generated greed in families with marriageable sons. The dowry system has led to greater class and gender differentiation. Dowry demands have impoverished poor peasant families with one or more daughters and have led to a decrease in value and greater dependency of women on their families. Girls have become a bigger burden for their family. Women in the village do not have the option to get a job and earn their own dowry like many women in urban areas do nowadays. Nevertheless, there are indications that women have started using dowry to assert their agency in their relationship with their husbands. In Jhagrapur, I did not find evidence of increasing violence against women in relation to dowry. Finally, it was argued that microfinance brings no solution for landless families to come out of their poverty. These families mostly have no access to microfinance and if they do, it often leads to further indebtedness and a downwards spiral.

The above mentioned changes are closely related to socio-cultural and religious aspects of the position of women in Jhagrapur. These aspects will be dealt with in the next chapter, in particular Islam, moral values and changes in education, family planning and the declining authority of the traditional village leaders. The latter will be illustrated by an example of how poor peasant women working in rice mills in the village are stigmatised.
6 Moral values, gender ideology and power

The introduction of the Green Revolution has brought changes to the lives of the villagers not only affecting economic relations, but also social relations and cultural norms and values. This chapter is about moral norms, values and gender ideologies as imposed by Islam, the state and other local and global powerful forces, and how these have been changing in the context of Jhagrapur. Norms and values are important elements of the social structure of class and gender relations; they demarcate the space in which people in the village have to operate and negotiate their interests. But norms and values are not uniform and there have been contradictory developments. On the one hand, this has led to stigmatisation of women while on the other hand it has created more space for women to defy certain norms and values.

Changes in society take place not only at the material level, but also in the minds of the people, in ideologies. This is often a process that is mediated by the state, religion, NGOs or other powerful forces, but also by people’s agency. The more the various powers interfere in the daily life of people, the more people’s thinking is influenced by the ideology explicitly or implicitly promoted by these powers. Saptari (2000: 12) pointed out that with the development of the state, its policies and ability to manipulate media, education, legislation and social institutions, the way people think is influenced in many ways, particularly with regard to women and the household. Saptari argues that it is our task to:

…map the tensions of hegemonic notions of family and external interventions into family life, household structures and domestic arrangements on the one hand, and the persistence of cultural variations and local subversions, on the other. In other words, we become highly attentive to the tensions between structure and agency, culture and practice.

Translated to the case of economic transformation in Bangladesh induced by the state, foreign ‘aid’, and transnational companies, we need to study which changes in the household can be attributed to external interventions, and what has been the result on women’s/people’s agency. People’s actions can be either in line with external interventions and dominant ideology and hence strengthen these, or they can challenge them. In particular changes in gender relations and ideologies that have taken place with regard to women’s position in the household and society and women’s empowerment that found its expression in moral values, in marital relations (family planning), in education and in the village power structure will be dealt with. These elements provide the background against which my findings on women’s relationship to land and social transformation will be analysed in chapters 7 and 8.

6.1 Islam in Jhagrapur

In chapter 4, I have described how Islam in Bangladesh has been embraced by the state from the second half of the 1970s and how there have been signs of a growing political Islam. In Jhagrapur there have been a few developments that
point in the same direction, but most of these are not more than incidents in which some people have tried to assert their authority rather than an indication of a clear trend towards a growing Islamisation. One such incident happened toward the end of 1999 during one of my fieldwork periods. During Durga Puja, one of the main Hindu festivals, the idols of the goddess were going to be immersed in the canal on the road between Gangni and Alamdanga just outside the village (Plate 32). This event is organised yearly by Hindu businessmen from Gangni; the canal is the nearest waterway where such immersion is possible. Many villagers went to see the immersion, but several of them could not make it to the canal as some villagers had stopped them on the road and forbidden them to go. “This is not for Muslims; you should not go there”, they were told. Although quite a number of villagers did attend the ceremony and many others condemned the fact that these people had prevented others from going, it is a sign of a growing intolerance.

Another sign of a growing influence of Islam, I noticed in the village during the November harvest in 2004. Several shopkeepers who held a halkhata\textsuperscript{114} (the occasion where customers have to pay their outstanding bills) played a cassette with an enflaming speech. When I asked some villagers about it they explained to me that it was a Maulana (religious leader) who was speaking against Humayun Azad, a popular writer who has written critically against oppression of women by Islam and who has been assassinated by political Islamists in 2004. These villagers agreed with what the Maulana was saying. Usually during halkhata shopkeepers put up a

\textsuperscript{114} Literally: account-book changed at the beginning of a new year. Usually a halkhata is held a few times a year, not only for customers to pay their arrears to shopkeepers, but also e.g. to pay for services, such as deep or shallow tube well irrigation and use of power tiller.

\textsuperscript{115} In Bangladesh women are not allowed to enter the mosque, they are supposed to pray at home.
Mike and play loud music to attract the attention of their customers to remind them to pay their bills, but now this occasion is also used to send out other messages.

Box 6.1 Meena’s husband wants her to wear a *burka*

One day in 1999 Meena told me: “My husband wrote to me that the women there all wear a *burka*. I’m afraid that when he comes back I will also have to wear one; I don’t like that. I have a lot of freedom now. The only problem sometimes is arranging for the cultivation of our land. I have helpers; they arrange day-labourers and inputs and we have given part of the land in sharecrop.”

In 2005 when I met Meena at someone else’s house she told me: “My husband has been here for holidays and he is thinking of coming back but I told him to stay there and earn more money. If he comes back I won’t have my freedom any more. I will have to stay at home and wear a *burka* when I go out.” But when I went to her house a few days later Meena told me: “It’s alright when he comes back after some years, I will take it as it is, I will wear a *burka*.” I mentioned that before she said that she wouldn’t like that. “I don’t mind. It is good now; he brought me a *burka*.” She took the *burka* and put it on to show me. “Once my husband took me to a doctor in Meherpur, then I had to wear it. I like wearing it.” I asked her: “Isn’t it very warm?” “Yes, it is very uncomfortable”, she replied. Meena was clearly in two minds about it. Her changing attitude may have been connected to all the benefits that she was experiencing from her husband’s job. She continued: “When my husband was here he brought lots of things, expensive *saris* and a golden chain. But I won’t wear the chain, it is too dangerous, it may be snatched away. He had a carpenter made beds, one for me and one for my son, and he also had a latrine and bathroom made. He sends money regularly.” She was clearly pleased with the wealth her husband was bringing them and if wearing a *burka* was part of that, well, then she would adjust to that.

As Meena indicated, she has more freedom to move around and to manage her household while her husband is abroad. At the same time she has to be more careful to show that she behaves properly and guards her chastity to protect the honour of her in-laws and her own family. Because she is alone she is more vulnerable to gossip and reputation damage: “I behave very well so that people cannot talk about me. My father sleeps here at night, so I am not afraid”, Meena emphasised.

Other signs can be noticed in day-to-day life as well, albeit some of them only temporary. Only a small minority of the men, although more than in the 1970s, go to the mosque to pray and apart from the mosque in the centre of the village that was already there in the 1970s, two small bamboo praying-sheds were constructed.
just before Ramadan in 1999, one in the western and one in the eastern part of the village. People explained that this made it easier for men to go and pray. However, a few years later these sheds had disappeared again.

Islamic symbols are also used more than before. More men wear a _tupi_ (hat) and whereas before no women in the village owned a _burka_ or talked about it, now a few women do. I also noticed a change in attitude in some of the women. For instance Meena, whose husband has been working in the Gulf for several years, at first showed fears that her husband might make her wear a _burka_ but later told me that she does not mind wearing a _burka_ (Box 6.1).

Mass media have penetrated the rural areas and television has become a common commodity, even for quite a few poor households, so people are well informed about major world events and like to share their opinion. After the Twin Tower attacks in New York on 9 September 2001 pro-Islamic and anti-US sentiments were clearly noticeable. Many people praised Osama Bin Laden and commented that America was very bad. Similarly, they expressed their sympathy for Saddam Hossain after the US invasion of Iraq (Plate 33). These expressions may not go as far as to indicate that people are supporters of Osama or Saddam, but it does mean that they identify with the Islamic world. The ‘War on Terror’, declared by the US government and supported by many other western governments, has certainly created more enemies.
While people may talk positively about Osama or Sadam Hossain, I have not seen or heard of militant Islamic activists in the village or the area and there are only few Jamaat-e-Islami supporters in the village. The majority of the people in the area support the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The Meherpur 2 constituency, of which the village is part, is one of the few constituencies where the BNP won the December 2008 national elections while the Awami League gained more than two-thirds majority in the country. But there is also a considerable number of people in the village who support the Awami League and the Union Council member from Jhagrapur is member of the Awami League.

The influence of political Islam has not been very strong in the village despite a growing tendency to promote Islamic norms and values. This may very well have to do with the influence of Sufism in the village. People from Jhagrapur originally came from further east in Bengal and settled in the village most probably during the reign of Nawab Shiraj ud Daulah in the first half of the 18th century. Most rural Bengalis are Atraf Muslims, to be distinguished from Ashraf Muslims who arrived in Bengal from the West beyond the Khyber around the 14th century. Ashrafs belong to the same aristocratic classes as the orthodox Mullahs (Dasgupta 2004). They look down on the Atraf Muslims, who are peasants and artisans and do not mix with them. Atraf Muslims are close to Sufism, which in Bengal amalgamated with the mystic pre-Muslim Sahajiya religious tradition to which the Bauls of Bengal also belong (Dasgupta 2004). In the village there are several Fokir families, as the Bauls call themselves; they visit the big yearly Baul gatherings in the neighbouring Kushtia District (Plate 34, 35). There are also followers of various Pirs (a Pir is a holy person) in the village and several of them attend big religious gatherings devoted to a Pir yearly. One of the villagers has even constructed a mazar (tomb, used as a place of worship) for a Pir in his homestead. These religious affiliations may be an explanation why political Islam has not had much influence in the village. Although Islam is definitely an important factor in peoples’ lives in Jhagrapur, other developments have an influence on the lives of the people as well, as we will see in the next sections.

6.2 Global linkages and moral values
Both economic transformation and other influences such as foreign migration improved communication and the village has opened up much more to the world.

116 The oldest villager told me that he had heard the name Nawab Shiraj Daulat from his grandfather. His grandfather’s grandfather had been among the first settlers in the village. It is likely that this refers to Shiraj-ud-Daulat, the last independent Nawab of Bengal. He lost the battle of Plassey against the British in 1757, which marked the beginning of the British East India Company in India.

117 Villagers told me that there is still a bad relation between people from the East and people from the West. Although two centuries have gone by since their forefathers came from the East, the people in Jhagrapur still have no relationship with people from one of the neighbouring villages who are Ashraf. They speak a different dialect, do not intermarry and do not do business with each other. The story goes that the first settlers of Jhagrapur who came from the East had a big quarrel with Muslims from the West who had settled in the area before. Then a Hindu Bania (businessman) offered them to settle around his big pond, the boro pukur. That is why the village is called Baniapukur.

118 The Sahajiya religion did not recognize the Brahmanic domination in Hinduism (Dasgupta 2004).
This can be noticed in many aspects of daily life, in particular of the middle and rich classes. People’s lifestyles are changing. In 1975 only a few people had a radio and a bicycle, a watch was still very much a luxury item and many people, especially women, had never gone further than a neighbouring village. When I first came to the village in 1974, women asked me where I was from and when I answered “from Holland” one of them asked whether that was near Meherpur (less than 20 km from Jhagrapur). Another woman told me later that when she first saw me she thought I was a ghost; they had never seen a foreigner. Now people know about the world outside the village and are informed about national and international political issues. Quite a few people have travelled outside the district and several men and women have a job outside the village, some of them in Dhaka. Televisions and mobile phones have become common commodities, and are now also within the reach of poor peasant households. Mobile phones have also connected women to the outside world, in particular when a son or husband has migrated abroad. Movies shown on television bring ideas of more freedom and romantic love into the homes and minds of people. Advertisements of national and particularly foreign products portraying women as desirable beauty models have shaped peoples’ desires and set new standards of beauty, modelled after western standards, and playing into the colonial legacy that everything white is more beautiful and superior. Young women in Jhagrapur can sometimes be seen wearing lipstick and some women use ‘Fair and lovely’, a widely advertised cream that makes the skin lighter (Plate 36). These ‘modern trends’ were unthinkable in the 1970s. Women do not act shyly (‘lojja’) anymore as was expected from a ‘good’ woman in the 1970s. Women are less inclined to accept just everything, they have become stronger and

119 Televisions also fulfil a social function for the neighbourhood, especially on Fridays, the weekly holiday, when a movie is shown on television and many of the neighbours who do not have a television come and watch the movie.
they appreciate their greater mobility. In general, people want to be a part of the modern world. Sayeda, a middle peasant woman, expressed the changes in the position of women in 1999 in this way:

Women now dare to open their mouth if they get beaten up. They have had more education, you can’t tell them just anything anymore, they see much more now. On television they see a movie in which a wife beats her mother in law who treats her badly. Laizu [their neighbour] went on hunger strike for one day after her husband had beaten her up.

Women are less inclined to accept just everything. When I asked her what changes had taken place for women, another rich peasant woman told me:

Before we had to go like this [pulling her sari completely over her head, also covering her face], now only like this [covering only her head, not her face], or like this [no sari over her head]. You could go outside the
A middle peasant woman described how women had become more assertive in public:

In buses men and women sit next to each other now, before women had separate seats. Now women tell men to get up in the bus ‘Ami bosbo’ [‘I will sit’] and they take them by the hand to make them get up.

These are all examples of how women challenge their subordinate position. Several people also referred to the fact that since 1991 the Prime Minister is a woman which sets an example for other women. But women are not (yet) free to just go when and where they like without their husband's permission. Many of them can go to places, but they have to tell their husband beforehand where they go, otherwise they are in trouble and risk being beaten up. Only few women take part in public activities, such as attending a village theatre performance or a village meeting. Women are not formally forbidden to attend village meetings, but they have to keep quiet if they do and are excluded from decision making in the community.

On the whole, women appreciate their greater mobility and apparently purdah has not been a constraining factor in the increased mobility and visibility of women in public spaces. Women still subscribe to the purdah norm, but they reinterpret Islamic norms to fit their changed circumstances. As observed by other scholars as well (Rozario 2002; Rudnick 2003, 2009), women have modified and stretched the meaning of purdah or found other ways to maintain purdah. In this way, women have moulded the structure in a way that enables them to cope with the changed circumstances and to adjust to their perception of being part of the ‘modern’ world. On the other hand, men express their dissatisfaction about women's behaviour and complain that women do not listen to them any more. Mondols complain that they are not respected any more and some men express their fear that their wife may run away if they give them land or if they do not keep them under control by (the threat of) beating her. Men's complaints and fears indicate their dependency on their wives. An increased emphasis on Islamic norms and values may well be, at least partly, a reaction to these ‘mundane’ influences. Hence, men reinforce an Islamic identity to counter these trends and to emphasise their hegemony.

These worldly influences also find expression in the increase in love relationships between boys and girls now, as several people told me. Although chastity of women is one of the strictest moral norms, these relationships are often of a sexual nature. Films and advertisements display images of romantic love and desire, which catch people’s imagination. People emphasised the influence of movies in this development. One middle peasant woman told me:

120 As a token of gender equality the government has abolished reserved seats for women on buses.
They see movies on TV and then they start a love relationship. Girls elope with boys and then their parents marry them off quickly. Women even leave their husband for another man. This also happens. And some people marry in Meherpur court now.

A serious consequence of the open display of love and suggestions of sexual affairs in a patriarchal society where women are regarded as the possession of men, is that men increasingly harass women when they refuse their advances. Women are stalked or even violently attacked when they refuse to give in to a man’s advances or marriage proposals. The most vicious of such attacks is acid throwing which maims a woman for life. Incidents of this nature are regularly reported in newspapers, but fortunately such vicious behaviour of men has not taken place in the village.

Mobile telephones have become common commodities (Plate 37) and they also facilitate relationships, as a young man from a rich peasant family explained:

There are many love relationships now; with mobiles it has become very easy. A boy and girl can secretly be in contact through their mobiles phones and they can fix a secret place to meet. Laila [a daughter of a rich peasant] just got married to a boy from Raipur, they could keep in contact through their mobiles. The boy’s parents still have not accepted the relationship, but her parents did and performed the marriage at night in their house. Before this she had another boyfriend, here in the village. She had many boyfriends. Bidesher system hoeche. [It has become here like in foreign countries.] I myself had a relationship with that girl too, but my parents didn’t accept and I married someone else.
Lovers often have a hard time to get their relationship accepted and most of the time they fail with parents refusing to accept the relationship and quickly making arrangements to marry their daughter off to someone else to avoid any further shame. Norms of purity and morality, and with that loss of status, play a role in the rejection of love relations, in particular for girls as parents fear that their daughter might lose her virginity before marriage. Virginity is regarded as a sign of purity and to be guarded carefully. If a girl’s virginity is lost before marriage, the honour and status of the family and lineage is damaged. As one middle class woman put it: “Parents are afraid that people will say: ‘your lineage girls are bad’”.

Love marriages are highly discouraged. For parents arranging a marriage not only means arranging future economic and social security for their children, it may also serve other purposes, such as raising the status of the family and broadening its economic, social, or political networks through connections with the family of the prospective bride or groom. This is why parents wish to remain in control over the choice of the marriage partners of their children. Status and, linked to it, class discrimination are an important reason for disapproval, especially if the boy is from a poor family and the girl from a rich family. One day in 1999 Hassan, whose father is a poor peasant, related his bitter experience to me:

“I was in high school in another village, I lived with relatives. I had a relationship with the daughter of a rich family. But her father found out about it and then he promised someone 35,000 Taka if that person would kill me. My girlfriend heard about it and told me. She was worried about me and told me to flee from there, so I fled. I felt very bad. My girlfriend has now been married off to a boy from a rich family, against her own wish. It hurts a lot, my love will always remain.”

He also told me about a few similar cases in the village:

“Most of the time it happens like this between a poor boy and a rich girl. Boys are also chalak (clever) to fall in love with a girl from a rich family. But in 95 percent of the cases the boys lose and the girl is married off to someone else.”

Apparently, boys sometimes try a love affair with a girl from a rich family as a strategy to raise their status, but most of the time this strategy fails. Similarly, girls may try this as a strategy, but they are even less likely than boys to be successful due to the dowry demands of a middle or rich peasant family being too high for a poor girl’s family. Several boys and girls have eloped and whereas some of them were able to reconcile their parents later, for others there was not such happy ending. In one case, a girl was married off to a boy in another village because she had a relationship with a boy next door. Even after her marriage the boy and girl stayed in contact and finally they eloped. Then the girl’s father filed a case against the boy who was arrested and put in jail and the women who had helped the couple
escape were beaten black and blue by one of the girl’s relatives. In another case, some men were jailed (Box 6.2).

Illicit relationships are not new in the village, we heard of many cases in 1974/75 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 54-61), but now more girls are involved and to a greater extent than before. In 1974/75 girls were usually married off soon after they reached puberty to avoid problems, but now many girls first go to high school, at least for a few years, and are married off later as one of the conditions for a stipend is that they remain unmarried as long as they are in school.

**Box 6.2 A group of men jailed for arranging a marriage for a minor girl**

Around 1995 a middle peasant daughter had an affair with a boy from the village. Both were involved in the same political party as a few other (married) middle peasant men from the village. One night the group of men took the girl and boy to a Maulana in the neighbouring village and had them married. It is not really clear to me how this evolved, whether this was at the request of the girl or at the initiative of the group of men. According to some sources it was because the girl had told them that she wanted to marry the boy but had no money for dowry. According to some other sources the married men wanted to cover up their own sexual involvement with the girl (some of them are notorious for their illicit relationships). Then, soon after the marriage, the boy rejected the girl and as a result there was a quarrel in the village between the group of men who were involved in the case and a group who supported the girl. When the conflict could not be resolved, the father of the girl decided to file a court case against the men involved, to the surprise of the latter. They had thought that they would get away with the case, as the father would never be able to start a court case against them being far from rich. Finally the men were all convicted for arranging the marriage of a minor girl. They spent 4 months in jail and they each had to pay 50,000 Taka compensation. The girl was married to someone else.121

School also gives boys and girls more opportunities to have contact with each other as most schools are mixed. Many men and several women are said to have illicit affairs. One man who is well informed and also involved in extra-marital affairs told me that 25 percent of the men have extra-marital sex with women. Whereas his estimation may be exaggerated, certainly many men are involved. This man told me in 1999 that he had seen a woman with a man from outside the village in the light of his flashlight not long ago. Later on the woman came to him and told him to keep quiet but when he said that he would not keep quiet, the woman offered

---

121 In the end the girl was the one who lost. Apparently she died under unclear circumstances. According to some people she was sick and kept on taking medicines from a kobiraj (quack) causing her death.
herself to him in exchange for his silence. Men who have illicit affairs are from all classes but the majority are rich peasants whereas the women are mostly poor peasant women (but I know of a few middle and rich peasant women as well). Poor women are driven by poverty to give in to men’s sexual desires for money and men take advantage of their poverty to use these women for their sexual pleasures.

6.3 Moral values and poverty

“Women from our village do not work outside the house”, villagers assured me repeatedly. When I asked why in one of the conversations on this topic, an old landless woman said: “Then they will lose their chastity.” This is clearly one of the dominant gender norms in the village. In the 1970s, most women did not work outside the homestead either, but villagers did not feel the need to emphasise this; it was a fact, the ‘normal’ practice and not a matter of discussion. During my fieldwork visits for this study, I heard more and more people, both men and women, emphasise that women do not work outside the house. However, this norm seems to apply in particular to poor women. Several middle and rich class women do have jobs, mostly outside the village. Some poor women clearly expressed that other norms apply to them: “The rich forbade our village women to work outside.” But when I told them that some rich women also worked outside the village they said: “They are rich. When a rich woman works outside the village then nobody dares to say anything.” This shows the double standards of the rich and the village leaders. Despite all of this several poor women do work outside; they are mostly widows and divorced women who have no other means to survive.

Plate 38  Divorced woman running her shop. Poor women have less need to uphold their status.
The greater emphasis on the norm that women do not work outside the house has to do with two contradictory but connected trends. On the one hand, due to poverty and the influence of development NGOs and western donors that focus their programmes on women, there is a growing trend in the country to increase the physical mobility of women. On the other hand, the growing Islamisation of society, in combination with the fact that rural women have been further pushed out of production, has led to a greater emphasis on reproductive values. Yet, the dominant discourse of *purdah* and the need for women to stay at home is emphasised especially by the rich and powerful. Rich and middle peasant women have to uphold their status, while this does not count for poor women (Plate 38). Although *purdah* is generally given as the main reason for these social norms, I argue that *purdah* is not the main reason. Rather, *purdah* is used to enforce underlying patriarchal norms of male dominance and women’s subordinate position. The fact that women’s mobility has increased considerably since the 1970s indicates that women are willing to defy or reinterpret *purdah* norms. Thus, why would *purdah* be the main obstacle for women to work outside their homestead? Another argument that defies the central role of *purdah* in women’s inability to work on the land and their consequential lack of control over land is the fact that in other Islamic countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, women do work on the land. Apparently there are other interests at work here.

Shahnaz’s case illustrates how patriarchal gender ideology can constrain a woman’s agency. In 2001 Shahnaz told me that she was very interested to join the *Ansar*, the paramilitary force (see chapter 5, Box 5.8). But in 2002 when I asked her again about this she told me:

> My son doesn’t want me to join the *Ansar* because other people will speak badly about me. He says that he will work as day-labourer and take care of me. They speak badly about women who work outside the village. The rich don’t allow our women to work outside the village.

When I mentioned that there was another woman from Jhagrapur who had joined the *Ansar* force earlier, she said: “Yes, in the beginning they talked bad about her too, but not any more. They are rich.” Shahnaz clearly regretted not being able to join, although she did not express this in words. Nevertheless, joining the *Ansar* force would have meant being away from her sons most of the time and going against the wishes of her eldest son who had grown up in the mean time and now wanted his family to conform to the dominant gender ideology. Shahnaz, who had previously been prepared to ignore the prevailing norms and gossip of people was now left jobless and with an ambivalent feeling. It proved more difficult to ignore her son’s wishes to conform to religious and social norms. In fact her kinship ties constrained her not to pursue her own wishes. The case of Shahnaz, who is landless, shows that there can be a tension between poverty, moral values, and social norms. Shahnaz herself had wanted to join the *Ansar* force had it not been for her son who prevented her “because people will talk bad about her”, reproducing the moral values, gender ideology and power.
hegemonic gender ideology. For Shahnaz herself, considerations of being able to have a regular income were stronger than moral considerations and *purdah* norms. Her kinship ties prevented her from actually joining the Ansar and she accepted her son’s wish for him to take care of her.

Not all landless women have a husband or a son to take care of them. Their poverty forces them to defy gender norms and moral values to be able to survive. Certainly not all people adhere to the dominant ideology and they may look for ways to avoid or even subvert it. Although gender ideology of male domination and unequal gender relations are a serious constraint for women to go against the flow, it is not impossible. There are women in Jhagrapur who explicitly defy social norms and values, not only for their survival driven by poverty, but also because they resist the control of men, often at the cost of being stigmatised.

**Box 6.3 Rushina and Shahina do not want to marry again**

Rushina is a divorced landless woman and has a young son who is still in school. She left her husband when she found out that he already had a wife. In 2009 she told me: “After I was divorced I made a case against my ex-husband, a lawyer helped me. The case lasted 6 to 7 years, but in the end I won. My ex-husband refused to give me land, then the government sold part of his land and I got Tk 1.4 *lakh*. I put all that money in the bank for my son for later.” She runs a small shop on the roadside in the village. For some time she lived mostly from husking paddy at the mill and selling the rice, and raising animals, but she could not survive on that, as she had not enough capital to buy paddy to process. She does not care what other people say about her. One day I met her on the road when I was on my way to Gangni by bicycle. Jokingly, I asked her whether I could give her a lift. To my surprise she said ‘yes’ and sat down on the bar of my men’s bike. At one point in our conversation on the bike I asked her whether she would like to marry again. Her reply left no doubt: “Do you think I could ride the bike with you if I had a husband? He would say that I have to come down immediately.” Rushina clearly does not like to be controlled by men.

Shahina is another example. Shahina divorced from her husband when her daughter was not even one year old. She remarried twice, but now she doesn’t want to marry again. In 1999, when I visited her in her house where she lived with her 9-year-old daughter next to her widowed mother, she insisted: “It won’t match and I won’t be free anymore to go my own way. I can run my own affairs.” Shahina inherited 0.5 *bigha* of land from her father. She hires in day labourers to cultivate it. Since seven years she runs a small shop in her house, which she set up with a loan from an NGO. “I myself buy all the items for the shop in the nearest small town.
I go there by van (goods carrier rickshaw). Since two years I am also official depot holder of an NGO that carries out family planning programmes.” She shows me the contraceptives in her shop - condoms and pills. Shahina tells: “They gave me a training and I did a survey of the whole village for them. …I taught myself reading and writing, I can read books now. I am intelligent. I am the intermediary between villagers and the NGO. They pay me 500 Taka per month. Nowadays everybody practices family planning, even those who strictly follow Islamic rules. Now nobody takes it secretly.”

Some of these women are divorced and do not want to marry again; they do not adhere to the norm that to be single is not an option for women, except for widows. They have been able to overcome the constraints and dare to step out of oppressive marriage relations; they make a conscious choice not to remarry. Whereas before, staying single was by force of circumstances, now some women make an explicit choice to stay single after a divorce (Box 6.3). These are often women who have no one else to take care of them and they have nothing to lose.

With more women defying gender norms it seems that men feel the need to explicitly reassert certain norms for women such as the norm that “our women do not work outside the house”, which I never heard in 1974/75. This could indicate that men have the feeling that their power is waning. The case of women working for traders in the rice mills is another example of women defying gender norms. In the next section I will analyse their case as it shows several processes that are at work in the subordination of women.

6.4 Stigmatisation of women

All the women who worked at the rice mills were landless. They live on the premises of the rice mills. When I asked some of them whether they were married, they all said: “No, do you think we could do this work if we had a husband? They would not allow us”. They were all divorced or widows and had no one to take care of them and ‘protect’ them. Widows and divorced women generally have more freedom of movement, as there is no husband to control them directly and restrict their movements and, as they are landless, this work is one of their very few options to survive (Plate 39, 40). Only after some time in the village did I realise that all the women who work at the rice mills in the village are from outside Jhagrapur.122

So, no women from the village itself were employed there. This is in line with what villagers repeatedly assured me: “Women from our village do not work there”. I asked women at the rice mill, as well as some villagers, why women from Jhagrapur are not employed there. The first explained: “They will go home in

---

122 The women’s home villages are situated in the same sub-district, but at quite some distance from Jhagrapur. I have the impression that there are no marriage connections between Jhagrapur and their villages. This may be of relevance here. Possibly traders recruit women from villages that are outside their own social network, as they may fear implications for their own status. It would be interesting to study this further.
between all the time, that’s why the bosses don’t want to take them”. But several women from Jhagrapur painted a different picture: “It is not good for women to work there, only bad women work there.” At my question why, a landless woman explained: “If a woman sleeps with her boss, that is not bad?” Another time, an old poor woman first gave the rather standard answer “the women there are bad”, but a bit later she clarified: “The rich have forbidden to work there. …The women will lose their chastity. Islam has increased and therefore women are not allowed to work outside.” So the gossip is that women who work at the rice mills are ‘bad’ women, because they have sex with their bosses. It is true that a few relationships have developed between traders and women working for them (Box 6.4).

**Box 6.4 Conversation at the rice mill**

One day in 2007 I sat with some women and their traders working at one of the rice mills and asked them about the allegations that the women sleep with their *malik* [boss]. After insisting they tell the truth, the following conversation developed:

A young man explains: “He [pointing at Hassan, a poor peasant who trades rice] is her [pointing at one of the women] husband”.

J.A.: “But he has a wife in the village.”

Hassan admits.

J.A.: “So you don’t live with your wife in the village?”

Hassan: “Yes I do, in the daytime I’m here, at night there.”

Another man: “He is lying. He is 2 nights there and 5 nights here.”

J.A.: “Why are only women from other villages working here, why not from here, there are so many poor women here without an income?”

First young man: “Women from the village don’t do this work.”

Hassan: “I will tell the truth. If a woman and man sleep under same blanket, then people talk bad about them, that is why there are only
women from far away here, then people in their village don’t know.”
J.A.: “So women from here work in rice mills in other villages? Who are they?”
Hassan wants to tell, but the young man prevents him and denies that any women from the village work elsewhere in rice mills. I don’t insist further, not wanting to compromise anyone.

I heard of one trader who had married one of the women working for him, repudiating his first wife and children and during my fieldwork another one eloped with a woman working for him, leaving behind his wife and children in the village. Even so, it certainly does not mean that all the women actually sleep with their bosses. Besides being economically exploited, these women working in the mills are branded as prostitutes for their (supposed) sexual relationship with the traders they work for, no matter whether they actually have such a relationship or not. They are outcasts; which is the price they have to pay for their work at the mill.

Why are the traders themselves not talked badly about? Why are only the women stigmatised and is all the blame put on them? How to explain this? The stigmatisation of women at the mills cannot be seen in isolation, but should also be seen against the background of the social transformation that is taking place in the area and in rural Bangladesh over the last few decades that I have described previously.

Plate 40  Woman boiling paddy at a rice mill in Jhagrapur.
In particular poor women bear the brunt of the resulting cracks in the power structure by being stigmatised. There are some specific mechanisms at work. First of all, the stigmatisation is used by the rich to assert their power and their control over women and to strengthen the gender ideology that ‘good’ women do not work outside the house. This stigmatisation also emphasises class hierarchies and reinforces the image of their own women as ‘good’ women. Besides, if women from Jhagrapur were to work at the rice mills, it would not be so easy for the rich men to use the women there for their own sexual pleasures. Their wives might start hearing more rumours which could lead to a further defiance of their authority. By labelling the women at the rice mills as ‘bad’, men give a signal to the women from the village not to mix with these women and not to work outside the house for else they will also be branded as ‘bad’. Although the stigma is labelled in terms of violation of women’s chastity (an age-old strategy of men), the main function is for the men to assert their authority over women and to keep the existing class and gender hierarchies in place. Joke Schrijvers (1999) has pointed to similar processes in Tamil refugee camps in Sri Lanka, where women and girls who have taken up jobs outside the camps and enter into love relationships, are labelled as prostitutes. She argues that this serves to maintain the gender and age hierarchies, and to keep women, in particular young women, under control. The ‘good’ woman identity and the ‘bad’ woman identity are in fact two sides of the same coin. Both are social constructs intrinsically linked to the prevailing patriarchal ideology in which chastity of women is a crucial element. Hence, the stigma put on women by men who want to keep them in their place, is generally of a sexual nature. It touches on the core value of women, invented by men to control women. In a male-dominated society, norms and values are set by men and serve to reassert their superiority and masculinity and to subordinate women. Men who ‘conquer’ women are ‘real’ men, while women who (are forced to) give in to men are ‘whores’. No matter whether such allegations against women are true or not, it puts them in ‘their’ place. In this way, men can use their power position to take advantage of women by exploiting them both economically and sexually without any consequences for their own status. At the same time women, are made into the identity bearers of the group and are therefore expected to keep up the honour of the community. For this reason they need to be ‘protected’ and kept under control. The image that is being created of the women at the mills is used as a weapon to control them and to reassert men’s authority, allowing them to get away with their double standards. But also women have internalised these norms and use them to put other women in their place. This is not very different from the way in which women in the western world are often portrayed as whores or, the other side of the coin, as saint-like mothers. In both worlds the dichotomy serves the same purpose.

A similar mechanism at work here is the labelling of people who are perceived as a threat, as ‘the other’. Castles and Miller (1998: 30) first pointed out this mechanism in the context of migration. By labelling or stigmatising female labourers from outside the village as the ‘other’ they are made into outcasts. Castles and Miller argue that dominant groups who perceive others as a threat ascribe undesirable
characteristics and an inferior status to the latter. They label ‘others’ and give them a certain stigma, which is then repeated over and over again thereby institutionalising prejudices. The prejudices work to exclude people who do not fit in, and who, in the eyes of the dominant group, have crossed the boundaries of prevailing norms and values. Although Castles and Miller make their argument in a different context, similar mechanisms are at work here in a gender context. Not only have women at the rice mills crossed the physical boundaries of their villages, they have also overstepped the moral boundaries of the prevailing gender norms that women do not work outside their homes and do not interact with men from outside their family. Therefore, these women are seen as a threat, in particular by men from the dominant class who fear to lose their control over women. In order to deal with this perceived threat, women working at the rice mills are projected as ‘bad’ women and as ‘the other’ from outside the village, even by other poor women, and are excluded from the village community in this way. Women internalise the norms set by men or use them to their own advantage thus reproducing the dominant male discourse. Rudnick (2003) has argued in the case of Bangladeshi migrant women in Malaysia who were labelled as ‘bad’ that the dominant gender discourse is too powerful to counteract and so, if one cannot fight the leading discourse (stigmatisation), one had better join it. By labelling others as ‘bad’, women aim to convey that they themselves do not behave in an immoral way and, by doing so, assert that they are ‘good’. Mostly middle and rich peasant women tend to emphasise that the women working at the rice mills are ‘bad’, but several poor women did the same to indicate that they are not like those women. At the same time, some of them affirmed that if there were to be work for them outside the house, they would certainly take it, but not at a rice mill!

Thus, the stigmatisation serves to maintain both gender and class hierarchies. As we have seen before, the norm that women do not work outside their houses does not apply to rich peasant women and to some extent to middle peasant women. Apparently, this norm applies to poor women only and there are double standards. Several middle and rich class women have a job outside the village, mostly as teachers, and this is not questioned by anyone; they have ‘respectable’ jobs that do not make them ‘bad’ women. Zarina Rahman Khan (1992: 183) examined the value attached to the various kinds of work that women do, both unpaid work in the household and paid work outside. She found that there is a clear status ranking of women’s work “based on the degree of (a) deviation from the norms of mobility and (b) the connotations of the need for the woman to supplement male income of the household’, which reflects the inability of the men to fulfil the family needs. According to Rahman Khan, non-income-generating work within the domestic sphere has higher status than income generating work while women’s domestic work in other households implies less status loss than traditionally non-

---

123 Marty Chen (1986) has also studied the effect of women’s paid work on their status and found that earthwork, construction work, rice mill labour and agricultural labour significantly decreased the status of women.
female work in the public sphere, such as earth cutting and brickfield employment. Her study concerned only work done by poor women as she did not examine jobs done by middle class women, but contrary to the poor women’s work, obviously, these jobs are status-raising, while the work of the women at the rice mills is clearly regarded as status lowering.

I found further indications of status loss for women in relation to the agricultural transformation where the introduction of the rice mills has also had a negative consequence for middle and rich peasant women. As men operate the rice mills and have taken over work that was a woman’s job before, women’s work is now valued even less by men. In the previous chapter we saw that middle and rich peasant women had more leisure time thanks to the introduction of the rice mills. The other side of the coin is that men now claim even more than in the 1970s that women have a lot of leisure time and that their work is very easy. The only hard work they did had been taken over by the rice mill. And so, men claim that men’s work is much harder than women’s work. “Women have a very easy life now”, one man said during a group conversation that I had one day in 1999 with a group of men and women while they were winnowing paddy. A small peasant woman set him right: “Men have no work for 2 months a year, but our work is everyday.” Such remarks by men usually come with an undertone suggesting that men’s work is much more important and that women’s work nowadays has even less value. That men have a clear interest in downgrading women’s work was revealed by the joking remark of a middle peasant: “If we say that women have more work than men, we may have to start cooking.” This remark implicitly indicates the dependency of men on women, but also the hidden resistance of women.

6.5 Education

Another development that goes against the gender ideology of women’s confinement and gender inequality is the increased participation of girls both in primary and
in high school. In 1999, I collected data on enrollment of girls and boys in the primary school in the village and in two high schools in neighbouring villages, and compared these with the figures of 1974/5 (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 70). In 1974/75 a total of 114 children was registered in primary school, whereas in 1999 the number of pupils had increased to 248 (Plate 41). The number of girls and boys was more or less equal in both cases. As to the number of students in high school, in 1974/75 only two out of seventeen high school students were girls; they were both from rich peasant families. In 1999, a total of 61 girls and 51 boys were enrolled in high school, almost one-third of them from the poor peasant class. In the meantime the numbers have gone up even further, but I did not collect figures on enrollment in education after 1999. Nowadays, many poor peasant girls go to high school for at least a few years, while their brothers often have to earn additional income for the family as day labourer. This indicates a tremendous change. An important reason for the significantly higher number of girls in high school is the stipends programme for girls who go to high school. Although the stipends are rather small, these do work as an incentive for parents to send their daughters to high school, especially for the poor classes. But maybe more importantly, with the expectation that dowry demands will be lower for educated girls and that education raises the chances of finding a better match for their daughter, parents allow their daughters to go to high school. This argument is often used by teenage girls as well. Several girls told me that they prefer to go to school rather than getting married at this age. They were able to use the stipend programme and the prospect of a lower dowry as an argument to convince their parents to allow them to go to high school and not be married off yet in an example of how women use the structure to their own advantage. To some extent, studying has become an accepted reason for postponing a woman’s marriage. Although the majority of the girls are still married before they are 16 years old, it is not uncommon nowadays to find girls of 16 or sometimes even older who are still unmarried, whereas in 1975 there were hardly any unmarried girls of 14 or 15. Girls use education as an argument to support their request to their parents not to marry them off yet. Yet at the same time the educational effect of the stipend programme is limited as the majority of the girls drop out after two or three years of high school in order to get married. In 1999 there were only 5 girls in class 10, the final year of high school. The fear of not being able to find a bridegroom once the girl becomes older and the perceived danger of girls entering into a love relationship and losing their chastity are important factors for parents to have their daughter married before they complete high school. For girls, finding a good match is obviously more important than the limited prospects of getting a job.

124 This includes the enrollment in primary schools in Jhagrapur run by NGOs.
125 These figures should be taken with some caution as these are the official enrollment figures and do not necessarily match with the actual attendance figures. Several evaluation studies of the stipend programme have shown this.
126 According to the principal of the high school in one of the neighbouring villages, the stipend programme for girls who are enrolled in high school was operational in the Jhagrapur area since 1996.
127 Contrary to my own findings, in other areas the number of early marriages has reportedly been increasing due to dowry (Daily Star August 17, 2002 reports about an alarming rise in early marriages in Narail).
Education for girls is also seen as a way to reduce the dowry demand as dowry demands usually decrease when a girl has had some years of high school education. This is an indication that the value of a girl goes up with education. Most likely this is not because of increased chances to find a job, as everybody knows that there are hardly any employment opportunities for women in the area. Moreover, Ahmed and Naher (1987: 196) have pointed out that most husbands do not like their wife to work after marriage.

They also pointed out that it is difficult to find a bridegroom if a girl is over-educated or over-qualified, as their bridegroom would have to be at least as qualified. Some (mostly rich) villagers voiced the same opinion and warned against the supposed advantages of an educated daughter from a poor class, especially if she had gone to college. They argued that it might be difficult for these poor women to find a suitable bridegroom as there are fewer boys from poor families who have studied in college and a boy does not like to marry a girl with more education than he. However, the actual practice points in a different direction: several rich and poor peasant girls with a few years of high school education have been married to uneducated boys. As a rich peasant woman clarified: “For an educated boy they would have asked too much dowry.” So, apparently education is not a key issue in the choice of a marriage partners, and it is not a breakpoint in marriage negotiations. Apparently the villagers I spoke with expressed their patriarchal concerns that had in the meantime been overturned by the present practice. Villagers also argued that men from middle and rich classes would not marry poor women, even if they were highly qualified. Obviously, these were rich peasants expressing their class concern about poor girls marrying a boy from a rich family. My findings confirm that class is a factor in marriage practice; marriages between educated girls and less educated boys are mostly within their own socio-economic class. Thus, class is a breakpoint in the choice of marriage partners, but not education.

The key question is whether increased participation in education contributes to a structural change in society towards greater gender and class equality. In previous sections, we have seen that women’s (exclusion from) ownership of means of production and their participation in the production process/labour market are important elements in the value attributed to them in society and to a large extent determine their dependency on men. As of yet, a higher level of education does not guarantee a place in the production process or labour market, let alone a change in norms and values leading to equal participation of women and of the poor in society, all the more given the generally low quality of education. Nevertheless, villagers often mention education as an important factor in the empowerment of women and of young people. Several girls who studied in high school expressed that they had become less ignorant and felt more confident, more informed and more aware of the possibilities. Others expressed their satisfaction about having been able to postpone their marriage or having increased their mobility. A rich peasant told me:
Nobody respects the village leaders any more because everybody has more money now and more education. Sons know more than their fathers and they don’t accept everything their fathers say just like that any more.

Both men and women have started to exercise their agency in challenging traditional power structures and education has played a role in this. In this way, education has made some difference.

There have been several attempts at adult education by NGOs (Plate 42) but these have mostly failed; the programmes disappeared again after one or a few years because of lack of interest and people’s complaints that they have no time for it.

6.6 Family Planning
Another change that has transformed gender relations is the fact that many couples have started using contraceptives. In 1975 there were 173 households with a total population of 1017 persons and in 1999 there were 419 households with a total population of 1678 meaning that the average household size had decreased from six to four persons. Apart from the splitting up of joint families, the smaller size of households is largely the result of the now generally adopted use of contraceptives. Nowadays, almost all couples have adopted family planning. They have fewer children and also have longer time gaps in between their children. In 1974/75 only a few couples used contraceptives. Some poor women had an IUD (Internal Uterine Device), mostly because they had been promised money as a reward, and a few women used the pill, but they were not always aware of how to use it properly. One woman told me that she thought that she had to take the pills all at once and would then be protected for one month. Men were mostly not in favour of family planning, let alone of having a vasectomy operation themselves as they feared that it would make them impotent. But, although only a few women used...
contraceptives, it was obvious that they were interested. Often women came to me asking why I did not have any children. I always answered that I used contraceptive pills, opening up the possibility of a discussion on the topic which they were usually keen to take. Some of the women then asked me to get the pill for them as they were too shy to talk to the male family planning worker who visited the village from time to time. A few women told me that they used contraceptive pills secretly, without their husband’s knowledge, clearly demonstrating their agency.

People’s knowledge about and attitude to contraceptives has changed gradually. In 1985, when I first revisited Jhagrapur, people talked more openly about it and I was told that more people had started practising family planning, mostly through using the pill. At the same time many people were still reluctant and said that they were afraid to fall ill as a punishment from Allah. So on the one hand the state promoted family planning but on the other hand many people believed that it was against Islam and this prevented them from using contraceptives. Nowadays, the use of contraceptives is widely accepted. During my recent fieldwork everyone, including the religious leader, supported family planning and no one said that it was against Islam. Even children have become aware of the need to reduce the number of children, as a 10-year-old boy told me:

“If everybody still had so many children as before, there would not be enough place in the world. Where is the place for so many children?”

The NGO that has a depot in a shop run by Shahina (Box 6.3) comes monthly to give injections and distribute pills and condoms (Plate 43). In 1999 women had to pay 5 Taka for an injection that works for three months. Contraceptives are subsidised by foreign aid and are mostly distributed by the government through NGOs. Some women go to an NGO in Gangni for an injection usually together in a group. The family planning policy that is promoted by the government and NGOs has been taken on by people mostly for economic reasons. As Shahina told me:
Nowadays everybody practices family planning, because to have many children is a problem as there is only little land. Even those who strictly follow Islamic rules use contraceptives. First some government people came and they gave pills free of cost. A few people started taking them. Then others saw it and gradually more and more women started using them. Now nobody takes it secretly. Most of the women take injections, about 100 women. Many also use the pill, but condoms are hardly used, I sell condoms to 10-12 people.

Women are most keen on taking contraceptives because they are the ones who get pregnant and are responsible for feeding and taking care of the children. Most men put the responsibility on their wife’s shoulders and so the burden is largely on the women.

Many couples now have only two or three children. Young couples use contraceptives not only for reducing the number of offspring, but also for child spacing. Several young couples told me that they decided to have only one child and they do not want more children, even some of them who had only one daughter. This is a real change compared to the 1970s when many couples continued having children until they had at least one son. The prospect of having to pay a high dowry sum for daughters plays a role and this prevents people from taking the risk to have another daughter. At the same time, the increased access to education has also played a role. Parents expect their daughters to have more opportunities in the labour market if they perform well in school and therefore also invest in their daughter’s education. The change in people’s thinking about having only one child, also if it is a daughter, is connected to these contradictory developments.

### 6.7 The village power structure

In this section I provide observations on the local power structure and the changing power relations. It provides the background against which women’s land ownership and the changes in class and gender relations will be analysed.

The power structure in the village is twofold and made up from the traditional village samaj (literally community) with its mondols, as the village leaders are called in the area, and the Union Council (UC), the lowest level of the elected state administrative structure. A Union Council has 10 elected members and 3 reserved seats for women. The most important functions of the Union Council are to implement

---

128 In the past there have been a lot of scandals regarding contraceptives provided as foreign aid. Rejected or outdated contraceptives from western pharmaceutical companies were donated to population control programmes in countries in the south and poor ignorant women were used as guinea pigs for new contraceptives such as Depo-Provera and Norplant. See for instance Hartmann and Standing (1989), Akhter (1992) and UBINIG (1988).

129 I have no information on this but it is conceivable that a pregnant woman is examined (or is forced by her husband to be examined) to see whether the foetus is male or female and then opts for an abortion if the foetus is female (although abortion is officially forbidden in Bangladesh). This happens on a large scale in India.
government programmes, such as road construction and other infrastructure, collection of taxes, maintenance of law and order, and distribution of relief goods and other government provisions. The Union Council members decide which villagers are eligible for relief goods and special government welfare programmes such as food rations and old age pensions. The Sholotaka Union Council, of which Jhagrapur is part, covers 17 villages. One of the middle peasants from Jhagrapur is a UC Member and one poor peasant woman from Jhagrapur has once contested a seat in the Union Council, but she lost. In many Union Councils the female members have no real power; they are mostly as token figures. On the whole, people do not have much faith in the Union Council and they do not expect much good from its members. People complain that the Union Council members mainly work for their own interest rather than for the common interest of the people and I witnessed a clear example of this in relation to the implementation of one of the government welfare programmes. The Union Council Member from Jhagrapur and the mondols together select the persons who receive food rations under the so-called ‘Vulnerable Group Feeding’ (VGF), and ‘Vulnerable Group Development’ (VGD), programmes for the ‘ultra poor’. Under the VGF programme, landless families are supposed to receive 10 kilos of rice per month for three months and under the VGD programme women are supposed to receive 30 kilos of wheat per month for two years. According to the village Union Council Member, 500 people in the Union receive the 10 kilos of ‘ration’ rice under the VGF programme and since 1999 in total 150 women, mostly widows, receive 30 kilos of wheat per month for three months under the VGD programme. Of the 150 women, only eight are from Jhagrapur. According to the Member, the women receive the wheat only for three months and then other beneficiaries are selected so that a maximum number of women can benefit from the programmes. In fact, this is against the objective of the programme, which is to give the women food assistance for two years and simultaneous training to enhance their income-earning capacity and to overcome their food insecurity. Several people who received VGF or VGD rations complained to me that they always get less than what they are entitled to. They felt helpless; they cannot do anything about it. They also alleged that the UC members pocket a lot of the rice themselves. One day in 1999, one of the poor peasants told me that the chowkidar had informed them that the next day they would have to go to the Union Council office in the neighbouring village to collect their ration and he told me: “You come and see for yourself.” (Box 6.5; Plate 44, 45) These corrupt practices are nothing new. In 1974/75 stories about incidents of corruption

---

130 The Vulnerable Group Feeding programme is functioning since 1975; the Vulnerable Group Development programme since 1996. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) provides the government with food grains for both programmes. Officially, the VGF programme is for distressed people during periods of natural disasters. The VGD programme is only for women and is given for 2 years to help them stand on their own feet. Apart from these programmes, the government has also set up an old age pension programme in 1998, the so-called “Boisko bhata”. Low-income citizens of 60 years and above receive Tk250 per month quarterly through the bank.

131 Information from World Food Programme: (http://webapps01.un.org/nvp/frontend/policy.action?id=184). See also the WFP Bangladesh site at http://one.wfp.org/bangladesh/?NodeID=35.

132 In 1974/75 Kati, the head of the only Hindu family in the village, was chowkidar. When he retired one of his five sons became the chowkidar.
Plate 44  Distribution of ‘ration’ food grains. Notice the stone on the weighing tray.

Plate 45  The stone is being taken away from the weighing tray after one of the UC members told the weighing man to do so.
of officials in the village were manifold. For example, a large part of the relief goods during the famine of 1974 were never distributed but were sold in the market and the money ended up in the pockets of the UC members. When I talked to one of the middle peasant women about these corrupt practices after my experience with the VGF rice distribution she explained to me: “All the UC members do that. Somehow they have to get back the money that they have spent on election campaigning.”

Box 6.5 Distribution of rice under the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme

Rice was being distributed in the Union Council office in the neighbouring village under the VGF programme. The people had to wait outside the office and per village they were allowed in to collect their 10 kilos of rice. The distributors used a manual scale that is commonly used in the area. A weight of 5 kilos was put on one side of the scale but on the tray on the other side, a big stone was put in between the rice every time. After observing this for a while, I took some photographs. Then I heard the Chairman say to the man who was weighing “pathor tule nao” (take the stone away). The man took the stone off, but after some time it was put back again (Plate 44, 45). Before I left the office, I asked the UC members who were present whether the weight on the one side of the scale was indeed 5 kilos; they confirmed this. I enquired: “Then why do you put the rock on the other side of the scale with the rice?” They explained: “We did not get the exact amount of rice from the government, but a bit less, 500x10=5000 kilo, but we got less than that.” When I asked them then how many bags they received from the government and what was the weight of each bag, they replied that they had received 60 bags. “But the weight in each bag is not exact. Sometimes it is 80, 82, 83, sometimes 90. [83x60=4980 kg] That is why we give everybody a bit less, otherwise there is not enough for everybody”, they clarified. But some time later they came with a different story. They brought a man with rheumatic crooked fingers to me. “You see, he has no VGF card, but still we give him rice.” When an old woman from another village came to me and complained that she had no VGF card, I immediately asked the officials in charge to give her rice too and she was then given rice. They told me to take a photo of her to confirm that she also received rice. Obviously, they were eager to cover up their cheating by showing how compassionate they were, even giving rice to people without a ration card, going beyond official instructions.

Undoubtedly the same mechanism is at work with regard to the other tasks of the UC that involve government money and goods. Many of the roads and other public works are not constructed properly and often break down after some time because officials and contractors pocket part of the money meant for the construction.
Apparently this is how ‘democracy’ works: making sure that you recover the price that you had to pay to get elected and get into power, even over the backs of the poor and powerless. How can people be expected to have faith in this so-called democracy and its leaders?

In the past corruption has not always gone unchallenged, as a grandson of one of the former Union Council chairmen told me in 1999 after Kati, the old chowkidar, (Plate 46) had died:

My dada [grandfather from father’s side] was chairman for 10 years; this was before the liberation war. Once the CO [Chief Officer] Gangni came to the Union Council meeting when the road was muddy. He complained why is there no good road here. Then Kati said: “Because the CO and SP [Superintendent of Police] eat up all the money for the road themselves.” The CO got very angry and tied up Kati in the Union Council office. When my dada came and saw him there tied up he asked why. The CO said that it was because he had said that. Then the chairman said: “It is true, untie him”, and Kati was released. At that time nobody dared to go against the UC chairman and UC member. My dada died in 1971, after liberation.

Another observation during one of my fieldwork periods relates to the Union Council task of enforcement of the laws. In September 2005, I noticed a board in the middle of the village near the primary school and the mosque that read in Bengali: “To give and to take dowry, both are punishable crimes.” Underneath was written “Announcement Sholotaka Union Council” (Plate 47). I was surprised to see this board. Were they finally organising a drive against dowry, one of the big sources of...
exploitation of women? I enquired from the villagers whether at any time anyone had been punished for giving or taking dowry and whether dowry had decreased. But everyone denied that this was the case. Rather, people kept complaining about the ever-increasing dowry demands. The only change I noticed, especially among middle and rich peasant families that had married off one of their daughters in the recent past was that they emphasised that they had not paid any dowry for their daughters marriage, but that they had given money at their own initiative because they were happy with the bridegroom; it was definitely not dowry. So the law enforcement drive of the Union Council by means of the board put up in the village as a token of their authority had not changed the dowry practice but only the language.

Village Mondols losing their power

Now let us turn to the functioning of the traditional village power structure, the samaj and its leaders, the mondols. The function of the samaj is twofold. First, the mondols, who are mostly rich peasants, have the power to arbitrate in the village court (shalish) and to settle conflicts among villagers. Secondly, the samaj functions as an assembly where the mondols decide about village affairs in public meetings. Women have no official place in this village power structure. There are no female mondols and women have no voice in the public meetings. In 1974/75, the shalish dealt with issues such as deciding about who gets relief goods, the construction of the village mosque, paddy theft from a rich peasant, the house of a badly-off middle peasant that had been set on fire by a rich peasant’s son, and illicit sexual affairs. It happened regularly that a bichar (arbitration by the shalish) ended
without any clear decision taken or, if a decision was taken, without enforcement. We concluded at that time: “The court functions only if a rich peasant accuses a middle peasant or a poor peasant, and is an instrument of oppression of the latter.” We also concluded:

The most striking feature of the village court is that it completely fails to deal with most land quarrels, while it is these quarrels which most disturb law and order. (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 172, 173).

Thus, the *shalish* was mainly an instrument of control for rich peasant men and most *mondols* were the biggest land grabbers. In the 1970s, and even before that, there were two rival factions consisting of rich peasants in the village that grabbed land from a lot of people. Most people still don’t have their land back till date. A small peasant whose father died more than 25 years ago when he was still young told me in 2006 how two members of the notorious gang operated and how they had grabbed 8 *bigha* of land from his father:

My father had bought land in 1970, but after his death they said that their father had bought that same land already 33 years before that. They had paid bribes to get the land registered on their name. We made a case against them, but it is going on since years. This gang has stolen land from a lot of people. This is how they worked. They observed who died and whose widow still had young children and then they took their land. They were educated, their victims were not. But now they cannot do that any more, because everybody is educated now, they cannot cheat people any more. All the cases are from long back.

So widows, especially with young children, were particularly vulnerable to land grabbing and many cases are still running since years. As the *mondols* used the *shalish* and samaj meetings mainly for their self-interest, most villagers did not have much confidence in them. The power of the *mondols* was already declining in 1975 and nowadays rich influential villagers cannot get away so easily with land grabbing any more.

Within the wider frame of society’s norms and values, the *mondols* set the local moral and social standards and they take care of the enforcement of social control. Thus the samaj has a direct influence on gender ideology and gender relations and therefore also on the private life of households. The following two cases that we heard and witnessed in 1974/75 illustrate how the *mondols* arbitrated and set the moral standards of behaviour. The first case had occurred a few years before we lived in the village.

---

133 While we lived in the village a notorious land grabber of one of the factions was killed by a member of the rival faction (see Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: Chapter 16).
A middle peasant was forced by the village court to marry a poor peasant widow, as it was said that he had made her pregnant. During the first two days of his new marriage the peasant kept denying that he was guilty and beat the woman severely. (He must have been certain about it himself, since he had had a sterilisation operation long before that time.) Finally the woman confessed that someone else had made her pregnant. As a result the marriage was dissolved again. However, no steps were taken to punish the real guilty person and force him to marry the woman. After all, he was a rich peasant and one of the village leaders. (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 59)

This case shows the hypocrisy of the mondols. Several of them were known to have illicit relations with women themselves, one of them even with the woman in question, but they were never punished for it. Thus the moral standards set by them counted mainly for women and for middle and poor peasants. A similar case occurred while we lived in the village, but the shalish never came to a conclusion. Bilkis, a young divorced poor peasant woman, found out that she was in the fourth month of her pregnancy, obviously too late for an abortion. When villagers came to know about it, some of them started talking about outlawing the woman and her family. In the village court that was called for her case, it turned out that she was not sure who had made her pregnant and she mentioned the names of several men. The talk in the village after that was that the man had been one of the poor peasants and that he would be forced to marry her. But then one of the rich peasants, who had been notorious for land grabbing, was murdered. This diverted all attention and the bichar never took place. Bilkis gave birth to a son and they lived with her parents.

When I started my fieldwork for this study in 1998, I heard of a similar case that had happened the year before. A young divorced woman from a landless family had become pregnant. She named an unmarried son of a rich peasant as the father of the unborn child, but he denied. Some women told me that they suspected that she had hoped that he would be forced to marry her if she exposed him, but in the meantime he had married someone else. There had never been a bichar about this case; after all, the culprit belonged to one of the mondol families.

The shalish hardly functions nowadays. In case of conflict, especially in land cases, middle and rich peasants mostly go to the judicial court now instead of getting a settlement from the village shalish. However, to some extent mondols can still set the norms. For example, in 1998 mondols prevented the performance of a play about an exploiting landlord, written by one of the villagers. They had done this indirectly by talking bad about the play and discouraging the performers. But a year later the writer told me that the play had been performed after all and it had been a great success. In the meantime he had written another play dealing with the practice of hilla, the (now mostly defunct) practice of a sort of interim marriage, which is required before a man can take back a wife whom he has divorced earlier. The practice of hilla is that a man is not allowed to take his wife back after divorce unless the wife
first marries another man and lives with him for three months and three days. Only after that period can she divorce the new husband and can her first husband remarry her. According to the play writer, “this natok [theatre play] cannot be performed. The mondols will object, they don’t want the people to know that hilla is not written in the Hadith [as was explained in the play]; then they will lose their power.” They would also lose the opportunity to use a divorced woman for three months in the case her husband would want to take her back. Villagers told me that hilla is not practised any more in the village, but that it had occurred several times in the past. One woman told me:

My neighbour’s mother hanged herself when she had been forced into hilla with one of her relatives. But now they go to court if they want a divorce, then they get a letter that they got divorced.

Another instance shows that village leaders do not always agree with each other. Some mondols and other prominent villagers set up a private college in the village in 2001. They named the college ‘Jhagrapur College’ and had the name engraved in an inaugural plaque. However, another mondo rejected the name and called a village meeting; the majority of the people mobilised to attend the meeting then opted to change the name and so the college was renamed (Plate 48).

Although the mondols still have some power, people regularly told me that they do not listen to them any more. A middle peasant explained in 1998: “There are no more meetings with the whole village like before. We do not go anymore to meetings but we send our sons because they do not listen to us anyway. But they cannot exploit us any more.”

Some Mullahs claim that hilla is a Muslim practice that has been written in the Hadith. However, no one has been able to point out where exactly it has been written. The only reference I could find to hilla was on the Internet, see http://www.banglapedia.org/HTM_0159.HTM. On the Banglapedia page it is claimed that hilla is according to Muslim law, but no further details are given. Some NGOs have been actively propagating that hilla is not written in the Hadith and should be banned. When I enquired further about hilla, some villagers started giggling and told that hilla has been performed in the village once or twice over the last ten years. They also hastened to say that it is not practised any more, but many people still know about the existence of hilla.
Moreover, the *mondols* had split up per para\(^{135}\), partly because the village had become much bigger, but also because they lost the authority over the whole village and were divided among themselves. A middle peasant woman said: “Now nobody respects the *mondols*. Everybody says: ‘I am *mondol*.’” One of the *mondols*, who was present, complained:

> “People listen less to *mondols*, therefore there are no more meetings. There is only party politics now - BNP, AL. During military rule it was not like that, then people listened to the *mondols*.”

On another occasion a middle peasant woman told me that men say that women are now *mondol*. When I asked why, she explained:

> Now the Prime Minister is a woman. Women see that and say "I am also the boss". *mondols* cannot exploit any more.

Several other people pointed to the fact that the Prime Minister is a woman as a reason why women defy male authority. However, women are still not allowed to say anything in village meetings “because then there will be quarrels; our women are not good, they fight”, another woman remarked. Women speak up more nowadays and that may well be the reason why they are not allowed to speak in village meetings. Since I started fieldwork for this study, I never witnessed any

**Plate 49** The *boro pukur* in 1975. People are taking the water out so that they can catch the small fish.

---

\(^{135}\) The village is divided in paras (neighbourhoods). In 1975 Jhagrapur had 5 paras, now the village has 8 paras. The village has expanded and a considerable amount of agricultural land has been converted into homesteads.
village meeting. People confirmed that there had been only very few meetings, among others about the repair of the mosque and the lease of the *boro pukur*, the communal pond in the middle of the village.

What happened to the *boro pukur* (big pond, the communal pond in the village) is an example of how the *mondols* used and still use their power to appropriate resources (Box 6.6).

**Box 6.6 Appropriation of the *boro pukur*, the big communal pond, by the rich**

Some 300 years ago, a rich Hindu who owned a big pond allowed migrants from the East to settle around it. The oldest people still remember that they lived around the *boro pukur* in the middle of the village. One of them told me: “I was born there, but when I was little we moved to this para. When I was 10 or 12 there was a big flood [this must have been the big flood in 1937, 1943 or 1945]; then we moved back to the *boro pukur* for 7, 8 years.” After Partition in 1947, most of the Hindu *Zamindars* left for India. At one point, some villagers found out that one calak (cunning) *mondol* had secretly registered the *boro pukur* land in his name. Then there was a big quarrel which split the village into several factions. Some villagers filed a case in the court against the *mondol* and the final verdict was that the land was the property of the entire village; it had to be registered in the names of 104 families, all descendents of the original settlers. Thus the *boro pukur* became the communal village pond. In 1974/75 each of the five paras had a part of the *boro pukur* and it was used for communally cultivating paddy. Part of the crop was used for the school and the mosque and the rest was consumed. Some people at that time told us that the rest was given to poor families but in fact it was mostly taken by the *mondols*. After the paddy harvest, when the *pukur* had almost fallen dry, poor people would catch small fish in it, supplementing their meagre meals (Plate 49).

Around 1990, the mosque committee needed money for restoration work on the mosque and one of the members proposed to lease the *boro pukur* out for fish breeding. In a village meeting it was agreed to lease the pond to the four highest bidders for 5 years (Plate 50). The lease money was to be used for repair and extension of the mosque (Plate 51). Initially some of the *mondols* conspired together; acting as two different groups in the bidding process they managed to lease the pond for Tk 85,000 for altogether 8 years. But other influential villagers found out about the cheating and they were prevented from continuing another period. In the latest bidding the lease sum shot up to Tk 350,000; the leasers were members of the richest families in the village and even one person from a neighbouring village. Fish cultivation has become very profitable now with a new popular breed of fish called pangas. The fish is sold to big traders who transport it.
to Dhaka and sell it there. The investments are high but the profits are manifold. The poor villagers are left with nothing and they lost the few benefits they used to have from the *boro pukur*. Part of the lease has been spent on renovating the mosque and beautifying the *Eid-gah*, but many villagers expressed their doubts whether all the lease money had been spent for that purpose and wondered where the rest of the money had gone.
So the *mondols* still have some power, but their power has certainly reduced. An important reason for this is that the poor are less dependent on the rich for their survival because there is a shortage of agricultural labourer and poor men also have other options to earn an income. Another reason is that people now also turn to the judicial court for resolution of conflicts. Yet another reason will be found in the next section.

**Underground parties**

A last force that needs to be mentioned in the context of the village power structure is the presence of underground armed groups that operate in the area since the late 1960s and have members in the village. They are part of the unofficial power structure and form a challenge to the power of the rich. These groups belong to a faction of the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (East Bengal Communist Party, PBCP), which is active in Meherpur District as well as in neighbouring districts. The PBCP is an offshoot of the EPCP (East Pakistan Communist Party) which was active in the area in 1974/75. The EPCP was a Maoist party that was formed in the 1960s to fight against exploitation by landlords inspired by the Naxalites in West Bengal. In those years, EPCP cadres held secret meetings in the village at night and went around shouting slogans and putting up posters from time to time.

Then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried to eradicate these underground parties and set up a special paramilitary force for that purpose, the so-called ‘Rakkhi Bahini’. This force was very much hated and feared by the people as they were very repressive. We would often see a column of trucks with Rakkhi Bahini moving along the main road in the distance and people would feel relieved when they had passed without turning towards the village. “During the daytime the Rakkhi Bahini forms our government, but at night it is the Rat Bahini (Night Forces)”, people used to describe the balance of power in the area. There were still a lot of weapons around from the 1971 Liberation War and weapons were also obtained by raiding police stations. In 1975, the Treasury Building in Meherpur town was raided and burnt down and the Rat Bahini captured 350 rifles (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 192-200). After Mujibur Rahman was killed in 1975 in a military coup, the Rakkhi Bahini was dissolved. During the following military regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General Ershad many underground party cadres were arrested and jailed for many years. An ex-PBCP cadre from a nearby village whom I met in 1999 told me that he was in jail from 1984 - 1991. After that he had joined the Workers Party, a left-wing parliamentary party. I also heard of several others who were in jail during the 1980s. In 2004 the Khaleda Zia government set up the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an anti-terrorist elite force consisting of members of various parts of the security forces. The RAB operates in a ruthless manner and many people have been killed by RAB in so-called ‘crossfire’.137

---

136 Members of underground left parties are nowadays mostly referred to as *sontrasi* (criminals, terrorists), this in contrast to when I first lived in the village; then they were called the rat bahini (night army) (Arens & van Beurden, 1977: chapter 21).

137 Amnesty International has regularly reported about RAB’s use of excessive and lethal force and Human Rights Watch describes RAB as a government death squad. Wikileaks revealed that RAB has been receiving training from the UK government.
The PBCP’s stated aim is to organise the poor peasants for armed class struggle against the exploitative rich class. In pamphlets they call on people to join the armed struggle against their class enemies, such as landlords and the corrupt police, and to establish an exploitation-free society. But now one of their main activities seems to be extortion of the rich. As one villager said:

At night they go around killing, dacoiting [robbing] and collecting ‘tax’. This is not rajniti [politics], this is petniti [stomach policy - a word he made up himself. He meant that their activities are only to fill their stomachs].

Several times during my fieldwork people told me that at night a group of ‘sontrasi’ had passed through the village, carrying weapons and wearing masks. They ran into them and were asked: “Who are you?” When they told them who they were, the ‘sontrasi’ replied: “You don’t need to be afraid, we won’t do anything to you, we don’t do anything against common people.” A few villagers assured me that the PBCP is not bad, they don’t do anything against good people, poor people, only against the rich. Only very few women have joined such groups. During my fieldwork periods I regularly heard that people in the area had been killed by the PBCP, usually rich peasants, local government leaders, alleged informants or members of rival factions. In August 2010 I happened to read in an online Bangladesh daily that on 16 August in the early morning Atiar, one of the PBDP cadres in Jhagrapur, had been killed by a ‘gang’ (a strange experience to read such news about the village from my desk at home in an online newspaper). Apparently Atiar had been a PBCP Meherpur District leader. He had been one of the main suspects in the country bomb attack on the house of my host family early 2006. It is not clear to me who killed Atiar. It may have been members of a rival faction, law enforcers, or some rich people who had been extorted and threatened by him and his group. One member of Atiar’s group had been killed a few years earlier and another person had disappeared. Both have possibly been killed by RAB forces. Since 2006 a RAB unit is stationed in Gangni and in November 2006, RAB forces had come to their houses to arrest them. When they did not find anyone of the PBCP RAB broke the doors and windows of the house of one of them and beat up his brother.

Operations by successive governments to wipe out underground groups have failed time and again. In many places underground party members are patronised by local political leaders and other influential people. Also in Jhagrapur, some of the rich with links to Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party are said to have given the outlaws shelter in their houses in the daytime, in exchange for protection from extortion and killing at night. This patronage is an important reason why many of them do not get arrested. But other rich families are threatened and some of them have moved to Gangni out of fear for these ‘sontras’, indicating the power of the gun of these underground groups. In chapter 8, I will give an example of how a woman has taken the help of some members of underground groups in pursuing her own interest.
6.8 Summary and Conclusion
I have argued that the influence of political Islam is not very big in Jhagrapur although there have been some attempts by villagers to reinforce Islamic values. I have also argued that moral values have been influenced by a new form of globalisation and the opening up of the village through improved communication and easier access to the market and to education, NGO activities, and not in the last place by poverty that forces women to work outside the house for their survival. Local dynamics have been modified by penetration by global forces. These developments have given women space to negotiate for their participation in education, postponement of marriage and their involvement in NGO activities. Through an example of women working at the rice mills, I have analysed how poor women whose circumstances force them to ignore moral norms and values, are stigmatised as ‘bad’ women and projected as ‘the other’ by village leaders in order to maintain class and gender hierarchies. This should be seen against the background of the waning influence of village leaders and the traditional power structure, which is partly due to the fact that people are less economically dependent on them. Finally, I have described the presence of underground parties in the area and their challenges to the power of the rich.

In the following two chapters, I will come to the main questions of this study regarding women’s land ownership, empowerment and structural transformation. In the next chapter, I will present and analyse my fieldwork data regarding women’s ownership of land (inherited and purchased) in Jhagrapur and analyse structural factors that enable or constrain women’s acquisition of land and their control over it.
This chapter addresses the first main question: what relationship do women in Jhagrapur have to land and has this changed since I first lived in the village in 1974/75? Here, I will present and analyse my research data on women’s ownership of and control over land in Jhagrapur. The issue of women and land ownership is complicated and the various dimensions can be conflicting. The main questions that will be dealt with in this chapter are: What is the extent of women’s ownership of land in Jhagrapur? Do more women in Jhagrapur claim their inheritance share compared to the 1970s? Under what circumstances do women claim their land rights, and which factors facilitate or constrain women’s access to and control of land? To what extent do women control the land they own? What are the obstacles to women’s own control over their land? To give an idea of some of the complexities of women’s ownership of land I will first present the stories of three women.

7.1 Women and land: three women
In 1999 Halima, who grew up in Jhagrapur but was married in another village, told me:

My father died more than 30 years ago and as I was the only child I inherited all his land, some 12 bigha. I entrusted my land documents to one of the befriended rich peasants. I trusted him as he had helped me settle my affairs. He persuaded me to sell a small piece of land to him and got my thumb impression on the registration document. But I cannot read and write so I did not notice that the amount of land mentioned in the document was 2.5 bigha instead of 2.5 katha as we had agreed and he had paid for.

Obviously, this man had different motives for his kindness. He and a few other rich peasants, who are notorious in Jhagrapur for grabbing other people’s land with dirty tricks, saw an opportunity. Little by little, Halima lost all her land to these land grabbers in the village. One of them even managed to buy one bigha from her for not more than a sari. The fact that she had given all her land documents in custody to one of the land grabbers made it even easier for them to cheat her, as they knew all the particulars of her land. After her husband’s death 25 years ago, Halima returned to Jhagrapur and lived with her cousin-sister’s family. But after she had lost all her land and her cousin-sister had died, she was kicked out of the house. Ever since, she roams the area begging for food and money and all her possessions are in one shopping bag (Plate 52). In 2000, with the help of her son-in-law and a villager, Halima started a court case against the land grabbers. When I met her again in 2005, she told me that the court had finally decided that all her land had to be returned to her, but that so far she had not received any of it back. She was still begging and staying at various people’s houses. In the following years, the story becomes even more complicated. The villager who had helped her with the court case turned out to have his own interest in the case. His grandfather had also

138 1 bigha is equal to 0.33 acre.
139 1 bigha is equal to 20 katha, so, actually, he had taken 20 times more.
‘bought’ some land from Halima, so he wanted to get the land properly registered in his name. The other land grabbers also cooperated and had the land that they had occupied registered in their names. In the meantime, some other villagers had come to know about the case and convinced Halima that if they could successfully occupy her land they would buy it from her and give her money. They would try an old trick: to harvest the paddy that had been planted by the land grabbers who now cultivated the land. This resulted in a big fight between the rival groups in which both groups beat each other up. The original land grabbers were in an advantageous position as they had access to all the official papers and were in the process of getting the land registered in their names while the rival group could not show any documents. Halima confessed that she had not received any money from the second group. In the end, the original land grabbers had to give her some money and the case was settled. Halima is now spending her old age with her daughter in another village.

Selima’s story is quite different. She is a rich peasant widow who belonged to an influential family in Jhagrapur and was married into another influential family in the village. She told me in 1975:

I inherited 30 bigha of land, partly from my father, partly from my husband. My father died last year, my husband the year before that, my youngest son was in my stomach at that time.
Several of her eight children were still very young. She managed her household with the help of her daughter and two daughters-in-law and two of her sons cultivated her land. Selima was clearly in control of all household affairs and of her land and she refused to give her sons their share of land in their names after they had set up their separate households. She gave each of them only 1 bigha and kept the rest in her own name. One day, after another son had separated from her household and pleaded for some land she told me: “They will have to manage their own households, otherwise how will I live if I give all the land to them?” Although Selima inherited land from her husband’s family, 5 bigha of her rightful share were denied to her after the death of the second wife of her father-in-law a few years ago. One of Selima’s sons told me in 2002:

In a shalish (village court) it was decided that we should get the remaining land as well, but the widow of Omar [his father’s half brother] refused and started a court case. One day the police even came to arrest me on some false charges, but I was again released. The land case is still continuing.

Had Selima’s husband still been alive, he would certainly have had his due share, but because Selima is a widow, they could get away with denying her part of her rightful share. Nevertheless, Selima’s ownership of the land that she does have under her control has not been challenged, not even when she was in a most vulnerable position after her husband’s death.

So both Halima and Selima inherited a good amount of land long back, but their present situation is completely different. Both examples illustrate several interlinking factors that play a role in the issue of women and landownership. As is clear from Halima’s example, inheriting land and control over that land are two different matters. Other influences also come in to play, such as class background, gender roles, education, and post-marital residence. Apart from Selima’s strong character and the fact that she has several educated sons, her class background and the fact that both her father and her father-in-law had been influential mondols (village leaders), are important reasons why none of the rich peasants dared to play tricks on her, not even when she was in a most vulnerable situation with several very young children. Halima, on the other hand, did not have such a high status class background. Moreover, after marriage she lived in her husband’s village, far away from her own land. Apart from class, gender is a factor that works against both of them. As we have seen before, unlike in other Asian countries, women in Bangladesh are dependent on male members of the household for the cultivation of their land as they do not work on the land. The fact that women in Bangladesh have to conform to gender specific roles and norms can affect their control over the land. In Halima’s case it certainly would have made a difference if she could have managed the cultivation of her land herself. As for Selima, an advantage for her was that she had grown-up sons who could take care of the cultivation. But because she is a woman it was easier for her husband’s siblings to deny her part
of her husband’s share and challenge her full claim to it. Her class background works in favour of her, but her gender works against her. Another factor that plays a role is the custom that women move to their in-laws’ place after marriage and that most women are married outside the village even though village exogamy is not a must. For Halima this was an additional difficulty. If she had not been married outside the village, she could have managed the cultivation of her land herself with the help of her husband, she would have known better which plots were hers, and might not have been cheated so easily. Besides, she might have had some protection from other villagers, as she would have been settled into the village community. Lastly, education may be an important factor as well, but apparently only in combination with the other elements. Where both women are illiterate, Selima had literate sons.

These examples show several dimensions that play a role in the issue of women’s ownership and control over land and they can be conflicting with each other. But the complexity of the issue does not stop there. Apart from the above-mentioned factors of class, gender division of labour, exogamy and education, other factors such as gender ideology, social norms, and intra-household dynamics play a role as well, as is clear from the following example of Hazera, a rich peasant woman. Hazera and her husband are both from rich peasant families. When they had three children they separated from his joint family. In 1999 Hazera told me this:

We were afraid that there would not be enough food for our children. Nobody knows it but at that time we had food shortage in the family. And in the joint family I would not be able to keep chicken, ducks and goats and keep our income for ourselves. After a few years we could buy a little plot of land. We bought it in Ratan’s father’s name, for that I sold all my gold jewellery. He wanted to register the land in my name; he said “most of the jewellery you got from your parents.” But I said “no your parents also gave, I don’t want it in my name.” After we bought more land and by raising goats, chicken and ducks our situation slowly became good, with a lot of hard work.

When I asked Hazera why she didn’t want land registered in her name she said:

It gives only trouble because my children will start fighting about how to divide it. ...No, it is not possible to give equal shares, they won’t agree and they’ll get angry. As for their father, they don’t dare to get angry with him, but with me they do. They are scared of him, not of me, because I always took care of them; they were always with me. ...To have these golden earrings or bangles is all right, they are not worth so much. If I give these to one of them the other children won’t really mind, they’ll think: ‘Oh, that is not worth much’. But if I give land, they will get angry: ‘why did you give it to her or him and not to me?’

Apart from the fact that land is the most valuable asset, Hazera indicated that land ownership conflicts with her gender role as a nurturing and loving mother.
She does not regard land ownership as an asset for herself, but rather sees it as a burden. Therefore she prefers not to have the purchased land in her name. Apparently, gender roles can interfere with women’s desires to have formal ownership of land. Women’s authority in Bangladesh is more based on the love and care they provide, while men’s authority lies in their control over land. As in Hazera’s case, women may feel that they can avoid conflict and assert their authority over their children better if they do not have formal ownership over land. This does not interfere with her decision-making power in the household. Hazera is fully involved in the decision-making and has control over affairs concerning the household and land, as is evident from the above. Moreover, this does not mean that Hazera is not interested in acquiring land. One day in 1999 she told me about a piece of land next to their *bari* [homestead]:

That land is in Ratan’s name [her son] because there was a fight about it. Ratan’s father didn’t want to buy the land; he said we have no money for it. But I wanted it; we need it for my ducks because others won’t let our ducks roam there. If my ducks wander off to that land it might give problems. So I talked to Ratan and he supported me to buy the land. I myself scraped money together, sold a goat, some money from selling chicken and ducks, borrowed some from my father and then we bought it. That is why it is registered in Ratan’s name and not in his father’s. In the end Ratan’s father kept quiet.

Hazera clearly had an interest in buying this land, but she didn’t want to have it registered in her name. Apparently, women do not always desire to own land in their own name as it may interfere with other factors. Nevertheless, they may have control over household affairs and land matters, even if they do not have any land registered in their names.

Hence, the issue of women’s ownership and women’s agency is complex as many different factors are involved. Religion, class, education, gender ideology, social norms and marriage customs, all can play a role and can be conflicting with each other. The above examples also illustrate that both a class point of view and a gender point of view need to be taken into account. Class and gender are interlinking factors in economic and social processes. Class aspects influence gender aspects and the other way around.

### 7.2 Inheritance practices

Inheritance is an important way for women to obtain land. Women in the village usually know their inheritance rights. They know that they are entitled to half of what their brothers inherit of their parents’ property. They also know that widows are entitled to one-eight of their husband’s property if they have children from their husband, or one-fourth if they have no children. One widow who had only one daughter told me for instance:
My husband died when my daughter was 3, 4 years old. He had 4 bigha and I got 2 ana140 [one-eight's share], my daughter got 8 ana [half share]. My husband’s brother and his two sons took the rest. If I had had a son we would have gotten all the land.

In order to find out the extent of women’s land ownership in the village and the variables that may play a role, I conducted a survey in the village between October 2006 and January 2007. The survey covered 84 percent of the households (427 of the 506 Jhagrapur households at that time).141 I asked the female heads of the households whether they had inherited land from their father, their mother and/or, in case of widows, their husband or whether they expected to inherit land in the future. I also asked the women whether their husband had registered any purchased land in their name and/or whether they themselves had purchased any land in their own name. Besides these questions, I asked the women about the location of their paternal village, their level of education, the number of siblings they had, whether they were still in the possession of the land and who was cultivating it.

The survey results show that inheritance is the most common way for women to acquire land. Only nine percent of the women owned land that their husbands purchased in their name or, even rarer, that they purchased themselves. As the majority of the women who own land obtained it through inheritance, I will first deal with this. Out of the 427 women in the survey sample, 371 women came from landed families, so they were entitled to an inheritance share from their parents. Thirty-six percent (132 women) of these women inherited land from their father and/or mother; that is more than one in three women. The majority had inherited land from their fathers (thirty-two percent) and only four percent had inherited from their mothers. Nine women had received land both from their fathers and from their mothers. Sixty-three percent of the widows had inherited land from their husbands. However, women did not always get the full share they were entitled too. Often parents used the argument that women receive less than their share because they received dowry and gold at their wedding (ignoring the fact that dowry is mostly controlled by the husband). Thus, more than one-third of the women in Jhagrapur received their inheritance share (fully or partly) from their father and/or mother. This is more than I had expected, given the general idea that women renounce their parental share. As we have seen in chapter 3, most of the literature on women in Bangladesh mentions that women usually renounce their inheritance share in order to keep their brothers happy and so safeguard their right to maintenance and the right to return to their paternal home in case their marriage breaks down. But seeing that one in three women have inherited land from their parents is a considerable number which cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. So what does this mean?

140 This is an old measurement dating from the pre-British period. One ana is one-sixteenth part.
141 The class distribution of the 16 percent of the households that are not covered is more or less proportional to the percentage-wise distribution of the classes of all the households in the village.
7.3 Women’s inheritance 1975/2007

Does the fact that one in three women receives (part of) their inheritance share indicate a change in inheritance practices? Or is it simply not true that most women renounce their inheritance share? Agarwal (1994: 282) suggested on the basis of studies by several scholars that there is a change and that more women receive or claim their inheritance share nowadays. If this is true, then is such a change also visible in the village? A few women in the village said that this is the case, but others could not give a clear answer. One woman was very outspoken:

If brothers don’t want to give, then women quarrel with them for their rights. But if their father has registered all his land in their brothers’ names then she cannot do anything. …No, they don’t go to court, you need money for that.

In order to examine whether more women in Jhagrapur claim their inheritance share nowadays, I compared my data on inheritance of 1975 with my data of 2007. In 1974/75 I collected data on several issues, including land inheritance, from a sample of 20% of the female heads of households (thirty-six women) of a total of 173 households that were living in the village at that time.142 I realise that this 1975 sample is rather small to draw any conclusions, but it does indicate a trend. I compared the numbers and percentages of women who said that they had inherited land in 1975 with those in 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women with landed parents</th>
<th>Women who inherited land (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women 1975 sample (N=32)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women 2007 sample (N=371)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In 1975 thirty percent and in 2007 thirty-six percent of the women in the sample whose parents had land inherited (Table 7.1). The difference between 1975 and 2007 is not statistically significant.143 This means that, proportionally, no more women had received their inheritance shares by 2007 compared to 1975. Thus, from my data it cannot be concluded that more women have started claiming

142 Unfortunately I cannot provide detailed data on women’s ownership of land of a larger part of the households in the village for 1974/75. When we conducted the study in 1974/75 we did not ask each household systematically how much of their land was owned by women and how much land women had inherited. Although I did collect some figures on women’s inheritance the data were too limited and therefore not included in the book. At that time we also did not see the importance of women’s land ownership sufficiently. I dealt with the issue in one small paragraph only (Arens & van Beurden 1977 1980:46/53).

143 All significance tests have been done with the χ2 test.
their shares since 1975. However, as there is a big difference in the size of the samples and the 1975 sample is rather small, I hesitate to draw any definite conclusions from these data. More research is needed to come to a clear conclusion on whether more women claim their inheritance share nowadays.

So, the above findings indicate that both in 1975 and in 2007 around one-third of the women whose parents owned land received or claimed their land. What about the remaining two-thirds of the women? Did they all renounce their share? In order to examine this question I asked the same women from the 1975 sample once again in 2007 whether they had inherited land from their parents or whether they had renounced their share. Then I compared their answers in 2007 with what they had told me in 1975 (Table 7.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women of 1975 sample with landed parents (N=27)</th>
<th>Women who inherited land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>by 1975</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by 2007</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2 shows a big difference between the figures of 1975 and 2007. While in 1975 only 30 percent of the women had inherited land, by 2007 seventy-eight percent of these same women had inherited land. Thus by 2007 almost three out of four women of the 1975 sample had received their share meaning that the majority had not renounced their share. Almost half of the women had received their share only at a later stage in life. The determining factor that explains the difference in the figures between 1975 and 2007 is the age of the women. In 1975, the parents of many of the women in the 1975 sample were still alive, but by 2007 both parents of most of these women had died and they had received their share. Hence, life cycle is an important factor or, more precisely, the fact whether both parents are still alive or not. Many of the women told me that they had not yet taken their share after their father’s death because their mother was still alive and needed it for her survival. Women usually take their share only after both parents have died.

Given the above findings, it can be argued that many of the women in the 2007 sample will get their share only when they get older, after their parents have died.

The total number of women in the sample here is only 27 as four of the women had died by 2007 and 5 women were from landless families. Although this sample covered 20 percent of all households in 1975 (173), it covered less than 7 percent of all households in 2007 (506). Hence these data have to be treated with caution.
I asked the women both in 1975 and in 2007 whether they expect to inherit land from their parents in the future. Table 7.3 shows the numbers and percentages of women in the 2007 sample that said that they will or that they may inherit land from their parents later on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women with landed parents (%), N=371</th>
<th>Women who will inherit land (%), N=66</th>
<th>Women who may inherit land (%), N=72</th>
<th>Women who did inherit land (%), N=132</th>
<th>Women who did not inherit land (%), N=101</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The second column shows that 18 percent of the women whose parents own land said that they will inherit land in the future. They had been promised their share by their parents and/or brothers or they were confident that they would get or claim their share. Another 19 percent of the women (third column) said that they may get their share, but they were not sure yet. Especially some of the young women felt shy about this question or started laughing. They said that they might inherit some land, but they did not know yet. Their parents’ circumstances might change, or something else might happen. In fact there is a realistic chance that a woman’s parents will sell all or most of their land in the course of their life and so the children lose their potential inheritance share, or that brothers use tricks to register their parents’ land in their own names. This also happened to some women of the 1975 sample who did not inherit the land that they were entitled to because their father had sold all his land in the meantime. Nevertheless, as Table 7.3 indicates, 37 percent of the women (18 percent who ‘will’, plus 19 percent who ‘may’ inherit) have prospects of inheriting land from their father and/or mother at one point in their life. If all of these women indeed inherit land it would mean that potentially 73 percent of the women in the 2007 sample would inherit land (37 percent plus the 36 percent who already inherited land). This percentage is not very different from the 78 percent of women of the 1975 sample who had received their share by 2007.

Thus, given these findings, the conclusion can be drawn that, at least for Jhagrapur, it is not true that most women renounce their parental inheritance share. The majority of women whose parents own land will potentially inherit land in the course of their life (Plate 53).145

145 It is also imaginable that men keep up the myth that women renounce their share to conceal the fact that they deny their sisters their (full) inheritance share. This study does not give an answer to this. It would have been interesting to ask the men whether their sisters had been given or claimed their inheritance share and assess their attitude in this respect. However, I did not think of asking this at the time.
In order to find out whether my findings are exceptional or comparable with those of other villages or areas in Bangladesh, I searched for official figures on women’s inheritance and figures in other studies. Unfortunately, there are no official figures on women’s ownership of land, let alone on women and inheritance in Bangladesh. Government statistics on land ownership are not gender specific. Statistical data on land ownership do not distinguish whether the land is owned by men or by women. Besides, there are only few studies that give figures on women’s inheritance or women’s ownership of land in Bangladesh (White, 1992; Rahman Khan, 1992; Rahman & Van Schendel, 1997). Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare my data with their figures. Sarah White (1992: 129-130) mentioned in her study in a section on (women’s) ‘land and property’ that out of the 40 women in her case-study three Muslim women and one Hindu had gained land (10 percent), and one Hindu woman and eleven Muslim women had prospects of inheriting some land (30 percent). This is much lower than my findings of respectively 36 percent of women who inherited and 37 percent women who had prospects to inherit.

In the census of 1996, a distinction in land ownership is given between male headed and female headed land holdings, but not between land owned by men and land owned by women. If White had calculated the percentage of the Muslim women who had inherited separately it might have resulted in a higher percentage as Hindu women have no right to inherit land. Besides, White’s figures are confusing. She writes in this section about 40 case study women, but in an Appendix she described only 30 cases of women out of which 15 were Hindu, 13 Muslim and 2 Santal. So it is not exactly clear how many of her 40 case study women were Muslim, nor is it clear how many women had parents who owned land. Because of this it is not possible for me to exactly calculate the percentage of Muslim women who owned land in her village.

Eleven of the seventy-one widows in the village had husbands who owned no land at all.

---

Plate 53 Women in a village in the area at a ‘khana’, a meal in commemoration of the death of the father of a woman married in Jhagrapur. The majority of the women with landed parents will eventually inherit land.
Rahman Khan\(^1\) (1992:69-85) found in her study on women and work that 13 of the 36 land-holding households in her sample were female-headed, but only two of these women had inherited land from their father (she does not mention any women who had inherited land from their mother). The rest of the women had inherited land from their husbands. So, in her sample, only 5 percent of women inherited land from their fathers. This is much less than what I found. Lastly, Rahman & Van Schendel’s (1997) study deals specifically with women and land inheritance, but their data cannot be compared to the Jhagrapur data either as their point of departure is different. They studied official land records available for their study village and compared these with fieldwork data and a plot survey to understand how the land of a village was passed on by inheritance.\(^2\) Thus, their point of departure was the gendered inheritance practice of a particular village, while my starting point was the women living in Jhagrapur, their in-laws’ village. These three studies do not give a clear picture of women’s actual inheritance of land that is comparable to the data from Jhagrapur and therefore no conclusion can be drawn based on a comparison of their data with the data of this study.

So far I have dealt only with women inheriting land from their parent, but another category of women who have inherited land concerns widows who inherit land from their husbands. I deal with inheritance by widows here separately, as inheriting land from a husband has different dynamics than inheriting land from parents. I will start with a presentation of my figures.

Out of the 71 widows in the village, 57 widows had a husband who owned land. Of these 57 widows, 63 percent (36 widows) inherited land from their husband. Seven of the 19 poor peasant widows inherited only house-land, as that was the only land their husbands had. The other 29 widows also inherited agricultural land.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position</th>
<th>Widows whose husbands have land(^3)</th>
<th>Widows who inherited land from husband per class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

In Table 7.4 we see that there is a big class difference between the widows who inherited land. The percentage of rich peasant widows is by far the largest (82 percent) and much larger than the percentages of middle and poor peasant
women who inherited land. Middle peasant widows appear to be at a disadvantage compared to widows from other classes with regard to inheriting land from their husband as the percentage of middle peasant widows who inherited from their husbands is the lowest (44 percent). The differences between the three classes are statistically significant. An explanation for this could be that in rich peasant households there is less contestation about the land after the head of the household has died than in middle peasant households because the former have surplus land and therefore there might be less contestation by the immediate heirs.

On the other hand, there might be more contestation in middle peasant households as these have just sufficient land to manage and so a widow’s sons may want to keep the land under their control to ensure their own livelihood. In contrast to the middle peasant women, it is striking that more than half of the poor peasant (PP) widows inherited land from their husband, even if seven of them only inherited house-land and no land for cultivation. Nevertheless, house-land is also extremely important for these widows as it secures the place where they live (Plate 54). Economic vulnerability may be working to the advantage of these widows here. In the previous section we saw that class position does not seem to play an important role in inheritance of parental land, but in the case of widows inheriting from their husbands, there does appear to be a difference.

7.4 Factors that play a role in women’s inheritance
The fact that potentially almost three out of four women received their parental inheritance share means that about one in four of women whose parents own land will probably not get it. What determines whether women are successful in

Plate 54 Some poor peasant widows inherited only house-land as that was the only land their husband had.
receiving their inheritance share or not? It is not always possible to distinguish the
different factors, as it is often a combination of factors that play a role in facilitating
or preventing a woman from claiming her inheritance share. Agarwal (1994: 291)
mentions that dimensions such as class, exogamous marriages, education, gender
ideology and social and religious norms play a role in the issue of women’s owner-
ship and control over land. Agarwal also argues that the greater the male support
that a woman can fall back on, the more likely she is to file a claim. In most circum-
stances a woman’s male support will come from her husband, her sons, her father,
or her brothers. Apart from being a source of strength, this dependency on male
support also makes a woman vulnerable. Especially when it concerns claiming her
rights; a woman’s mediators may have different interests and be inclined to act in
their own interest. The case of Halima who lost all her land is an example of this;
the villagers who “helped” her all clearly had their own interests. In the following
sections I will examine some of the above factors.

Purdah norms and practices
Do purdah requirements form an obstacle for women claiming their inheritance
share as Agarwal (1994:291) hypothesised? Purdah requirements restrict women’s
mobility and contact with outsider which necessitates mediation to the outside
world by a male relative, usually husband, sons or brothers and makes a woman
dependent on their support. These restrictions can form an obstacle for women
managing their own land, as they have to hire labourers and deal with matters that
are regarded as men’s jobs. This can be especially difficult for widows if they have
to defy in-laws who may not accept that she acts independently and has taken over
their son’s tasks. In fact this has more to do with patriarchal norms of women’s
dependency on men than with purdah norms. Purdah can also restrict women’s
access to knowledge, information and education, so women may not always be
informed about their rights. As mentioned, I found that women in Jhagrapur are
quite aware of their inheritance rights, although they do not always know exactly
how much land their parents own. Nevertheless, purdah requirements can be an
obstacle for women’s access to information and education. Illiteracy clearly puts
women at a disadvantage, as we have seen in the case of Halima.

Next to Halima, there are several other examples of women who lost their land
in the village, even recently, when they were asked to put their thumbprint on a
piece of paper on some pretext. For instance, a rich peasant made his old illiterate
mother sign a land registration document when she was very sick. She was under
the impression that it was to register the land in all her children’s names, but in fact
she signed her land away to only two of her sons. But as we have seen in chapter
6, women now move around in public spaces much more (Plate 55) than before
and, for at least some of them, purdah is no reason not to buy land or to register
land in their name. Farida, a rich peasant woman who bought land by herself when
her husband was abroad, went to Gangni to register the land that she had bought

150 Significant at p<.05.
in her name. As she said: “Nowadays many women do that. Women are much wiser now.” Given the changes in purdah practice and women’s visibility in public spaces, it is very well possible that purdah restrictions have become less of an obstacle for women claiming their inheritance share than before. However, this cannot be concluded from this study as I have no data on this from the earlier study. The fact that many women told me that they will or may get an inheritance share may be an indication, but this will need further research.

**Post-marital residence and distance to natal village**

In Bangladesh, women usually move to their in-law’s village after marriage, although it is also accepted that after marriage a couple stays in the wife’s village. This can be the case when a family has no sons to cultivate the land or when the husband has no land, while his in-laws do. There is no strict norm of village exogamy but the majority of the marriages are exogamous which can be an obstacle for women to get their inheritance share. One of the women told me: “My brothers got all my father’s land in their names because from daughters it doesn’t stay, that is why, that’s what my father said.” What she meant was that the land would then get into the hands of another family elsewhere and the land would be lost for the patrilineage. In order to see whether distance from Jhagrapur to the natal village has an impact on women getting or claiming their inheritance share, as Bina Agarwal (1994) hypothesised, I also asked the women in the survey where their natal village was. Based on the answers, I divided the women into five categories with varying distance from Jhagrapur to their natal village. For each of these categories the percentage of women who inherited land can be seen in Table 7.5. In total 27 percent of the women in the sample were from Jhagrapur and 19 percent of the women were married to someone in one of the neighbouring villages (see third column), so
almost half of the women came from the village or its immediate surroundings. I did not find any significant class differences with regard to distance to marriage village. The class distribution of the various categories of distance between Jhagrapur and marriage village are proportionally more or less equal. Thus, not significantly more rich peasant women have been married within the village, or been married further away from the village than women from other classes.

The last column of Table 7.5 shows that 51 percent of the women who were born in Jhagrapur have inherited land. With 45 percent, women coming from neighbouring villages rank second. Both these percentages are significantly higher than the percentages of women from beyond the neighbouring villages. In other words, significantly more women who are from Jhagrapur and its immediate surroundings have inherited land than women who are from villages that are further away. Hence, from my data it can be concluded that distance from parental home makes a difference in whether women receive their inheritance share or not. These results are in line with Agarwal’s hypothesis.

What could be an explanation for why significantly more women from Jhagrapur and immediate surroundings got their inheritance share compared to women who come from further away? One hypothesis could be that women whose parental

151 Significant at p<0.001.
village is further away may be more inclined to sell their land than women who are from Jhagrapur one of the neighbouring villages as it is more difficult to manage and control that land. They would not be given their share because of their parents fear that their daughter might sell the land. For the neighbouring villages this would not count as village lands usually surround the village and so most of the land from the neighbouring villages is bordering on the land from Jhagrapur. It is almost as easy to access their land in neighbouring villages as land from the village itself. To verify whether women are more inclined to sell their inherited land if it is far away from the village where they are married, I calculated the percentages of women who have sold all their inherited parental land according to the distance to their natal village. Table 7.6 shows that the percentage of women from Jhagrapur who have sold their land (13 percent) is lower than the percentages of women from all the other villages. However, this difference is not statistically significant. Besides, the percentage of women from neighbouring villages who have sold their land (23 percent) is not significantly lower than the percentages of women from all the other villages. This means that the hypothesis that women are more inclined to sell their inherited land if it is far away from the village where they live is not supported by my data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance to parental village</th>
<th>Women who sold all their inherited land (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Jhagrapur itself</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From neighbouring villages</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bordering a neighbouring village (3-6 km)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far away (&gt;10km)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

What could then be an explanation for why significantly more women from Jhagrapur and its immediate surroundings have inherited land? Rahman & Van Schendel (1997: 257-259) argued that only women who are married within the patrilineage would take control of their land share. So, have women who are married within Jhagrapur or in a neighbouring village been married to someone from the same patrilineage? In the earlier study we collected information on which households belonged to which bangsa (patrilineage). Using this information, I found that none of the rich peasant daughters who were married within the village were married to someone from the same bangsa and only very few middle and poor peasant daughters. Instead, most daughters had been married to someone from another bangsa. Hence, my data do not give any indication that daughters are
married within the village to keep the ancestral lands intact. I did not investigate this question why parents would marry their daughters to someone from another bangsa in the village, but a likely explanation is that parents try to increase their influence in the village and one strategy for that is through marriage. Often members of one influential bangsa marry someone from another influential bangsa and it could even be further hypothesised that, if this is the case, parents are more likely to give their daughters their inheritance share to consolidate the bond between the two bangsas. This could then explain why more daughters from Jhagrapur were married to someone from Jhagrapur or a neighbouring village and it could be further argued that in particular rich peasant families would prefer to marry their daughters within the village. In order to examine this, I first looked at the class background of the households that have married one or more of their daughters within Jhagrapur itself (see Table 7.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position of all women from landholding parental households</th>
<th>Daughters from landholding parental households married within Jhagrapur per class (%)¹⁵⁴</th>
<th>Daughters from landholding parental households from outside married in Jhagrapur per class (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP) (N=62)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP) (N=85)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP)¹⁵⁵ (N=224)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (N=371)</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

In total 91 land-holding households have married one or more daughters to someone in the village¹⁵⁶ which is 25 percent of all the 371 landed households in the sample. If we look at the different classes, we see in the last column that 52 percent of

¹⁵² There are also women who sold only part of their inherited land. These women have not been included here as they still own some inherited land.

¹⁵³ There may have been some marital relations between some bangsas from earlier marriages, through marriages of sisters or mothers, but my information did not go beyond the present households and I did not include any questions regarding this in my survey.

¹⁵⁴ These figures concern households of the parents of the women and not their present households. Several households had married more than one daughter within the village. One rich peasant (RP) and one middle peasant (MP) household had married three daughters within the village; three RP, one MP and two poor peasant households (PP) had married two daughters within the village.

¹⁵⁵ Poor peasants (PP) are small peasants (SP) and semi proletarian peasants (SPP) taken together.

¹⁵⁶ These include households with ghorjamai, a husband from another village who comes to live with his in-laws after marriage and women whose husband has come to live with their wife in the village, independent from his wife’s paternal household.
the rich peasant (RP) households have married at least one of their daughters to someone in the village, while for the other classes the percentages are considerably lower (28 and 20 percent for middle and poor peasants respectively).

The difference between the percentage of rich peasant households on the one hand, and the middle and poor peasant households on the other is significant, while the difference between middle and poor peasant households is not significant. Thus, significantly more rich peasant households marry their daughters to someone in the village than middle and poor peasant households. Does this also mean that relatively more women from rich peasant families who have been married within the village inherit land compared to women from other classes? The class-wise percentages of women married within the village who have inherited land are given in Table 7.8. The last column shows the percentages of all daughters married within Jhagrapur who have inherited land per class. The differences in percentages between the classes with regard to inheritance are not significant.

In other words, there is no class difference in inheritance between women who are married within the village. But if we compare these figures with the average 36 percent of all the women in the 2007 sample who inherited land (see Table 7.1), we then see a considerable difference. Especially more women from rich and middle peasant women who have been married within the village (respectively 53 and 67 percent) have inherited land compared to the average of 36 percent. These differences are significant. The percentage of poor peasant women who have been married within the village and who have inherited (42 percent) is not significantly different from the average of 36 percent.

Table 7.8 Class-wise distribution of daughters married within Jhagrapur and inheritance (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position of daughters married in Jhagrapur</th>
<th>Daughters married within the village who inherited land (%)</th>
<th>Daughters married within the village who did not inherit land (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP) (N=32)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP) (N=24)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP) (N=46)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=102)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

157 Significant at p<0.001.
158 Significant at respectively p=<0.05 and p=<0.001.
159 Percentages have been calculated per class from the total number of women from landholding families who have been married within the village.
In conclusion, significantly more daughters from rich peasant households are married within the village and receive their inheritance share compared to daughters who are married to someone from another village. Although middle peasant households do not marry significantly more daughters to someone in the village, more of them tend to give their daughters their land share compared to those who have married their daughter outside the village. In other words, from these data it can be concluded that distance to marriage village is a factor in inheritance for women from rich and middle peasant households. If women were married outside the village, they were less likely to get their inheritance share. This may very well have to do with strategies of rich and middle peasant households to extend their influence in the village.

Level of education
Another hypothetical factor in whether a woman claims her inheritance share successfully is her level of education (Agarwal, 1994: 291). It can be argued that women who are more educated may be more likely to claim their share successfully as they may be better informed about the laws, are able to read the land registration documents, and may be better able to understand legal matters, procedures and the registration process. Men often take advantage when a woman is illiterate, as we have seen in the case of Halima who lived as a beggar because she lost all her land to rich peasants who had cheated her. In 1974/75 we heard of similar cases:

In one case for instance, a father had one son and one daughter. After his death both the son and the daughter got their legal share: 9 and 4.5 acres. The son, who was not content with this arrangement, brooded on a way to acquire the land his sister had inherited as well. (…) On a certain day her brother invited her to join him in going to Meherpur to see a movie. In Meherpur he asked her to put a thumb on a piece of paper, as her signature would be needed for getting tickets for the movie. But in reality she signed an agreement in which she transferred the legal ownership of her 4.5 acres to her brother. (Arens & van Beurden [1977] 1980: 163)

To examine the question whether women with more education are more likely to inherit land, I asked the women in the 2007 survey how many years of schooling they had. The class-wise distribution of education for these women can be seen in Table 7.9. In total 60 percent of the women did not have any education, 22 percent have had only (a few years of) primary school, 14 percent have had a few years in high school or more, and another 4 percent have been to college. So the majority of the women have not had any education.160

160 It needs to be mentioned that all the women in the sample are married women. Most of them have ended their education before marriage. During the past decade the participation of girls has increased very much due to a government stipend programme for girls who attend high school. Most of the women in this sample have not had the benefit of this stipend programme as this was not yet introduced when they were of high school age. The education level of the young generations of married women is most likely to be higher. Future research may therefore give different results.
Table 7.9 shows considerable class differences between women who have had education and women who have not. The percentage of women who have had no education (first column) is the highest among poor peasant women (SP+SPP), while the percentages of rich and middle peasant women are more or less equal. These differences are significant and hence class is an important determining variable in women getting an education.

Table 7.9 Education of women and class (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position</th>
<th>No education</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small peasants (SP)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-proletarian peasants (SPP)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 7.9 shows considerable class differences between women who have had education and women who have not. The percentage of women who have had no education (first column) is the highest among poor peasant women (SP+SPP), while the percentages of rich and middle peasant women are more or less equal. These differences are significant and hence class is an important determining variable in women getting an education.

To analyse the impact of education on inheritance, I combined the data on education and inheritance and calculated the percentages of women with education and without education who had inherited land. The bottom row of Table 7.10 shows that, in total, 32 percent of the women who have not had any education inherited land against 18 percent of the educated women. On the other hand, 22 percent of the women without education and 28 percent of the educated women did inherit land. These data show, contrary to expectations, that more women without education have inherited land than educated women. The differences between educated and uneducated women with regard to inheritance are significant.161

If we look at class differences (Table 7.10), we can see that the percentages of both educated and uneducated rich and middle peasant women who have inherited land are more or less the same, indicating that education is not a factor in inheritance. But for poor peasant women the percentages of uneducated who have inherited is much higher than for the educated poor peasant women. The difference between

161 Significant at p=<.05.
162 Idem. 160.
Table 7.10 Education, inheritance of land and class (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position</th>
<th>No education &amp; inherited</th>
<th>Education &amp; inherited</th>
<th>No education &amp; not inherited</th>
<th>Education &amp; not inherited</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small peasants (SP)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-proletarian peasants (SPP)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Educated and uneducated poor peasant women is significant which means that poor peasant women have a higher chance to inherit land if they have not had any education. For middle and rich peasant women education is not a factor in getting their inheritance share. It can be concluded that the hypothesis that educated women are more likely to inherit is not supported. A possible explanation for this may be that women who have been educated are thought to have more chance to get a job or get some other means of income than from land, while women without education have fewer opportunities. Another possible explanation could be that parents have to pay a smaller dowry for educated daughters, so uneducated daughters are at a disadvantage and this may be compensated by giving them some land (which they might then regard as dowry). These potential explanations would need further research. It should be mentioned here that it is possible that this trend that uneducated poor peasant women are more likely to inherit land may change in the (near) future as girls’ participation in education has increased considerably, as we have seen in chapter 6. The effect cannot yet be fully seen and will need to be studied later when these girls have reached the age that they will inherit land.

Economic vulnerability

To examine the relation between a woman’s economic vulnerability and her inheritance of land, I combined the class position of a woman’s present (marital) household as a measure of her economic vulnerability with the data on inheritance. I argue that class position can indicate a women’s economic vulnerability. The poorer her present household, the more vulnerable a woman would be economically. The last column of Table 7.11 shows the percentages of women who have inherited land from their
parents per class. As there is no significant difference between the classes with regard to the number of women who inherited land, this indicates that class does not play a significant role in whether women inherit parental land or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position of women whose parents have land</th>
<th>Women who inherited parental land</th>
<th>Women who did not inherited parental land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%164</td>
<td>%164</td>
<td>%164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP) (N=62)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP) (N=85)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small peasants (SP) (N=97)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-proletarian peasants (SPP) (N=127)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=371)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

Economic vulnerability, measured by class, does not seem to be an important factor in women’s inheritance. However, there is a possibility that, if economic vulnerability can work both ways as Bina Agarwal (1994: 291) suggested, it may have balanced out in the village sample. Another factor that could play a role in whether a woman gets their inheritance share or not is the class difference between her paternal household and her present household. The class position of a woman’s natal household and her present household, the household she is married into, is not necessarily the same. Women do not always get married to men from the same class or class position as their parents, or the position of their present household may change over time. Sometimes parents take their daughter’s economic situation into consideration when deciding whether to give her a share or not. It could, for example, be that parents may like to give their daughter some land to help her out if her present class position is worse than their own. Or the other way around, they may decide not to give her a share if her present class position is better than theirs and that of their sons. One rich peasant woman said:

163 I realise that a woman’s class position alone does not necessarily reflect her economic vulnerability. E.g. if a woman is married with a rich peasant but has a bad marriage she may be in an equally vulnerable position as a woman who is married to a poor peasant if she has no assets of her own. Nevertheless, I think that class position can to some extent be taken as a measure of economic vulnerability. Another measurement of economic vulnerability could be women’s (un)employment. However, hardly any women in the village are employed so this cannot be taken as an indicator in the village.

164 These percentages have been calculated from the number of women with landed parents in the sample per class. In total 56 women had parents who owned no land (3 RP, 5 MP and 48 PP).
I myself will get 10 katha of land from my father, I have not taken the land yet, my father is still alive. My sister will get 2.5 bigha because her situation is not so good. My brother will get the rest of the land.

So because this woman’s economic situation was good, her parents would give her less than she was entitled to, while her sister would get more. Another rich peasant woman told me that her parents did not give her a share because of her good situation. Only a few women in the village had renounced their share because their economic situation was better than that of their brothers. As one middle peasant woman told me:

My father and mother died about five, six years ago. We are three brothers and four sisters. We sisters would get altogether 26 katha (1.3 bigha), but we didn’t take it, out of love for our brothers and because we have enough land ourselves.

Thus a woman’s economic position can play a role in whether she gets her share (if her present class position is not so good) or whether her parents decide not to give it to her or she herself renounces it (if her present class position is good). Rounaq Jahan (1975) observed that daughters renounce their inheritance share unless they are from very rich or very poor families. Unfortunately, I do not have data of the natal and present class position of all the women in the sample in order to examine the overall trend, but I do have these data for the women who are married within Jhagrapur itself. I compared the number of women who inherited land and whose natal and present class position were different with the number of women whose natal and present class position was the same. The data do not indicate a significant difference meaning that in Jhagrapur class position does not play a significant role in whether a woman inherits land or not. My findings contradict Rounaq Jahan’s (1975) observation that daughters renounce their inheritance share unless they are from very rich or very poor families.

Finally, some villagers argued that a woman actually gets her inheritance share in the form of dowry at the time of her marriage. However, dowry cannot be equated with giving a daughter her inheritance share. First of all, dowry is only seldom given in the form of land; it is mostly a sum of money. But also, more importantly, dowry is not given to the daughter but to the bridegroom or his parents who control it subsequently. Furthermore, the way dowry is used may not be in the wife’s interest which is another important difference between dowry and inheritance. Generally, women have no say at all over the dowry that has been given for their marriage.

Kin relations
One factor that Agarwal did not mention, but that also turned out to play a role, is the character and circumstances of a woman’s natal family members, especially of her father and her brothers, and her relationship with them. This factor can work both ways. For example, there are parents who have registered their land in their
children’s names while still alive to prevent conflicts among their children after their death. Several women told me that their father or mother had registered land in their names and that they would receive that land later. One of them, Nurjahan, a middle peasant woman, told me:

My father is very good. He gave 1.75 bigha of land in my name when I was little. My brother also got land in his name. The papers are still with my father; he still cultivates the land and uses it. I will get the land after his death.

Nurjahan’s father has 8 bigha and she has only one brother, so her father did not register all the land that she is entitled to in her name yet, but she may get the rest later. As to land owned by mothers, a few women told me that daughters get land from their mother rather than from their father, as in the case of Nahar:

My father registered all his 7 bigha of land in my brother’s name but I got 2 bigha from my mother in my name. My sister also got land from my mother.

These examples are more the exception than the rule; many women do not get their inherited land officially registered in their name. This does not mean, however, that they did not get their share or part of it, but it does make women more vulnerable to tricks played by their brothers. Several women told me that their father or brothers had denied them their share or that their brothers had taken all the land (Plate 56) and that they felt powerless to do anything against it.

For instance Lutfa, a landless widow, told me:

My father had 9 bigha on his name. My only brother took all that. My father was illiterate, my brother took his fingerprint and took all his land. The day after that he let me know that father had given all his land to him. But my brother took the land by force. My father gave his fingerprint, I didn’t. If he would come for that to me would I give it? …I don’t have anything. My brother is very rich. Two sons are abroad, one of them is a doctor. …My body will smell with sweat, what to do? Can I do anything? They have paddy in their gola [storehouse], nice clothes. They don’t see me. I don’t go there; I feel a lot of hate.

Another trick that brothers use to keep the ancestral land in their own possession is to take the land benami (literally, anonymous, held in another person’s name). This is an arrangement in which a person registers land in another person’s name while the first person uses the land and takes the benefits of it. The benami arrangement dates back to at least the 18th century to facilitate registration of land in the name of wives, daughters or sisters who could not go to the registration office in person due to purdah requirements. Later it was mainly used to evade the
land ceiling law that put a limit on the amount of land that a person could possess. *Benami* transactions have been prohibited by the Land Reforms Ordinance, 1984 (Ordinance No. X of 1984). According to this Ordinance, the person in whose name the purchase is made is presumed to be the real owner and no evidence to disprove this presumption will be allowed by the courts. So in fact, the women whose land has been taken *benami* remain the real owners according to the law, but I have not heard of any women who challenged their brothers in court over this. Furthermore, as is the case with many laws, in practice the law is not enforced and brothers easily get away with their tricks.

In conclusion, the factors that play a main role in women’s inheritance are post-marital residence, distance to a woman’s parental village, and the character of the natal family. Education only plays a role in the case of poor peasant women, but contrary to expectations, more uneducated poor women have received their share than educated poor peasant women. I did not find any significant difference in inheritance with regard to economic vulnerability and class background and it has not been possible to come to a conclusion about the role played by *purdah* restrictions and the extent of male support.

---

165 I could hardly find any literature on *benami*. On the Internet there were only few references to *benami*. See e.g. http://www.vakilno1.com/bareacts/Benamiact/introduction.htm on the Indian situation. See also http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/L_0055.htm. Both viewed on 14 June 2009.

166 Chapter III Prohibition Of Benami Transaction Of Immovable Property. In India a similar law has been adopted, the Benami Transaction (Prohibition) Act, 1988 (45 of 1988). In this law an exception has been made for “the purchase of property by any person in the name of his wife or unmarried daughter and it shall be presumed, unless the contrary is proved, that the said property had been purchased for the benefit of the wife or the unmarried daughter.” (See http://www.vakilno1.com/bareacts/Benamiact/s3.htm.) The Bangladesh law does not have such a provision.

7.5 Women’s land ownership 2007: the full picture

In this section I present all my data on women’s land ownership combined. Most women have obtained land through inheritance, but there are also women who have land that their husband purchased and registered in their name or, in exceptional cases, that they have purchased themselves. Apart from that, land is not only inherited or purchased, but in many cases women have lost the land that they had obtained, either fully or partly, either because they have sold it or because it has been snatched away from them, mostly by their brothers, their husband or their sons. Before giving the full picture of how many women actually owned land in 2007, I will first present my data on purchased land.

Purchased land

Table 7.12 shows the number of women who received purchased land registered in their names. The bottom row shows that, in total, only 10 percent of the women in the 2007 survey had purchased land registered in their name. If we look at the class background, there is a big difference between the rich and middle peasant women on the one hand and poor peasant women on the other. Only six percent of the poor peasant women have registered land in their names against respectively 23 and 16 percent of the rich and middle peasant women. These differences are significant.168

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position of women from landholding</th>
<th>Women who have purchased land in their name %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasant (RP) (N=62)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasant (MP) (N=85)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small peasant (SP) (N=97)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-proletarian peasant SPP (N=175)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=419)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

It is not surprising that poor peasant women have significantly less purchased land in their names. Poor peasants are hardly able to purchase any land, let alone will they register it in their wives names. But it is rather surprising that a few poor peasant households apparently did manage to buy land, albeit mostly very tiny pieces and often by taking a loan. In some cases the land that had been purchased concerned house-land and in several cases people were forced to buy their house-land by the landowner on whose land they had built their house. The landowner would threaten to evict the family from the plot if they did not buy it from him. There were

168 Significant at p=0.001.
also some poor peasants who had bought a little agricultural land, sometimes with a loan from an NGO. With the increased productivity of the land with two paddy crops per year, even a tiny plot can make an important difference in the survival of poor households. In a few rare cases, a woman has purchased land by herself as in the case of Farida (Box 7.1).

**Box 7.1 Farida purchased land by herself and registered it in her own name**

Farida is a rich peasant woman. Her husband has been working in one of the Gulf States since 1998. In 2006 she told me when I asked her whether she had any land in her name: “I bought one *bigha* of land on the main road to Gangni. I registered the land partly in my own name and partly in my son’s name. I had to go to Gangni for the registration.”

In 1974/5 I never heard of any woman who would go by herself to buy land and register it in her own name. I asked Farida how this changed. “Due to NGOs”, she replied. “Nowadays many women do that. Now women know more.” But when I asked her whether she had also changed due to NGO she said: “No. My husband was in *bidesh* [abroad]. I told him that I wanted to buy the land and he replied: ‘Ok, do it’. So then I bought it.”

Another rich peasant woman whose husband is working in the Gulf also told me that she had purchased land in Gangni, but when she had proposed to her husband to register that land in her name he had objected: “Huh, land in Gangni, register in your name?” Then she had registered the land in his name. Later on she bought 0.5 *bigha* in the village and registered that in her own name. Not only women told me that their husbands had purchased land in their names, several men told me as well that they had purchased land and registered it in their wife’s name. One middle peasant told me in 2007:

I bought 5 *bigha* and registered 0.5 *bigha* in my wife’s name and the rest in my son’s name. …No, she is not allowed to sell that land. I have bought it for when she is old and I am dead, then she has something.

This man is obviously concerned about his wife’s livelihood security after his death. But there are also men who registered land in their wife’s name but later on sold it. Usually, women do not have control over land bought in their names as we will see further on.

Table 7.13 shows that 47 percent of the women have received land, both inherited and purchased. Rich peasant women are the largest group that has received land.
Table 7.13 Women who received land (inherited and purchased) per class (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position of present household (N=419)</th>
<th>Women who have received land (inherited &amp; purchased)</th>
<th>Women who have never received any land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP) (N=62)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants (MP) (N=85)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP) (N=272)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=419)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: fieldnotes 1998-2009 and survey 2006/07

However, as we have already seen in Table 7.6, many women who inherited land from their parents have again sold all or part of it at some point of time. On top of that, women have also lost their inherited land because their brothers, their husband or their sons have simply taken it. Therefore, the above figures give a distorted picture of women’s actual ownership of land in the village in 2007. Below, I will first present my data on women who have lost their inherited land and after that I will give the final full picture of women’s actual land ownership at the time of the survey.

Sale or loss of land

Table 7.14 shows the class-wise percentages of women who have lost all their land. In total 26 percent of the women (one in four women) who inherited or purchased land have lost their land again.

About two-thirds of these women sold their inherited land, because circumstances forced them to do so, or under pressure of their brothers, while the other one-third lost their land because their husband or sons had sold it against their wish or because their brothers had taken it without giving them anything in return. Most of the women who sold were forced to sell their land to their brothers far below the market value. They spent the money they received for the land for common

---

169 Several women had inherited land and also received purchased land in their names. Therefore the total number of women who received land is not equal to the sum of women who inherited and those who received purchased land.

170 Eleven women had sold part of their land. They have not been included in this table as they still have some of their inherited land. Eight women sold their land, but only to buy land in their marriage village so that it would be easier to control, either by themselves or, as in most cases, by their husbands. These women have not been included in this table either.

171 As percentage of the women who received land.

172 There might be another reason why so few rich peasant women lost their land compared to women from other classes. In the past it has been common practice for rich peasants to register their land on their wife’s, children’s or other relatives’ names in order to avoid the land ceiling of 100 bigha (33.3 acres) set by law. However, this is not very likely the case here as almost all rich peasant landholdings are far below 100 bigha.
household purposes, or their husbands and/or sons spent it for their own interest. Only a few of them invested the money. One woman invested part of the money in buying a cow and another one bought a sewing machine and gave the rest to her son in law to start a business. A third woman invested her money in the construction of a brick house and another paid for her stomach operation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Women who lost all their received land (inherited and purchased)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasant (MP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are some striking class differences in the percentages of women who have lost their land where most of the rich peasant women have been able to retain the land that they have received. Only 8 percent of the rich peasant women have lost all their land against 24 percent of the middle peasant women and 33 percent of the poor peasant women. Significantly fewer rich peasant women have lost their land than women from the other classes. Obviously, the good economic condition of these rich peasant women protects them from losing their land. Especially for poor peasant women it is difficult to hold on to their land, even if they are from the village itself. They are often forced to sell their land driven by poverty. Sharda’s case (Box 7.2) is exemplary for many poor women in Jhagrapur who have inherited land. Due to various circumstances Sharda’s family had to sell or mortgage their land, including the land that Sharda inherited from her parents. There are several other cases in which women lost their land concerning not only poor peasant women but also several middle peasant women.

**Box 7.2 Sharda inherited land from her father, but had to sell it**

Sharda is from Jhagrapur and was married to a poor peasant from the village in the 1970s. When Sharda’s father died in 2002, she inherited 0.5 bigha (0.15 acre) of his 8 bigha of land. Actually she was entitled to 1 bigha, but she told me: “We are four sisters and two brothers, but 4 bigha had already been registered in my elder brother’s name and my younger brother had run away to my mother’s paternal village, my mother has 2.5 bigha of land there.” When I asked her who is cultivating the land she inherited she responded: “My husband could not
cultivate the land as we had no money for inputs and he cannot work on the land any more. He is too old now and has skin problems on his hands; he even has to eat with a spoon. My son does not like to work on the land. He has studied in high school and he wants a job. So because we could not cultivate the land that I inherited I sold it to my brother. He gave only 5000 Taka for it, all that money is finished on whatever we needed for the household.” The market value of Sharda’s share was at that time eight to ten times more than what she got for it from her brother.\footnote{Other women who sold their share to their brothers also reported that they received much less money for it, between two to five times below market value.} When I asked Sharda why she sold her land for so little money she said: “Do you think I could get more? For land from your sister you give much less.” And she added: “My brother promised me a lot of other things, but he never gave me anything.” Later, on another visit to their house, her husband’s brother told me that they had taken a lot of loans and were in problems, as they had to repay them. That had been another reason for Sharda to sell her inherited land. The economic situation of Sharda’s household fluctuated over the years. In 1974/75 they were landless, her husband had not yet received any land from his father. He worked as a day labourer and they had one daughter. When her husband’s father died, their situation improved as he inherited 10 bigha of land. They got one more daughter and a son; all their children have married in the meantime. But over the years their situation deteriorated again. Her son told me in 1998: “We still have 6 bigha, but 3 bigha has been mortgaged; the 3 bigha that we were cultivating has been flooded, we lost the whole crop. In 1996 we sold part of our land to pay Tk 50,000 to a middleman to get me a job, but he cheated us and we lost all our money.” Their situation deteriorated further and they took out more loans which only further indebted them. In 2007 they had only 5 bigha left and it all had been mortgaged to repay loans.

### Actual land ownership

Having dealt with the various aspects of women’s land ownership - inheritance, purchase and sale - we can now appreciate the full picture of how many women actually owned land in the village at the time of the survey. Only 35 percent of the women owned land in 2007 against 47 percent who had received land meaning that one in four women had lost their land again. Not only is there a clear class difference in the percentage of women who received land, but also in the percentage of women who still own land. The figures of women’s actual land ownership (received minus sold or taken away) in 2007 are given in Table 7.15.

The last column of Table 7.15 shows that more than half of the rich peasant women, almost one-third of the middle peasant women, and one-fourth of the poor peasant women still owned land in 2007. Proportionally, almost twice as many rich peasant
women own land compared to middle and poor peasant women. The difference between rich peasant women on the one hand and middle and poor peasant women on the other is significant\(^{174}\) while the difference between middle and poor peasant women is not significant. In fact, it is remarkable that quite a considerable number of poor peasant women (29 percent) owns some land, even if some of it is only house-land and no agricultural land, given the fact that poor peasant households have very little land altogether. In total almost half of the women (47 percent) have received land, but only one in three has been able to retain it. Nevertheless, this percentage of 47 of women who have received land is considerably higher than is generally reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class position</th>
<th>Women who received land (inherited &amp; purchased)</th>
<th>Women’s current ownership of land in 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rich peasants (RP)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasant (MP)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants (PP)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Concluding, we can say that this study indicates that the general idea that women renounce their inheritance share to keep a good relationship with their brothers is a myth. There are a few women who renounced their share and some of them were denied their share, but the majority of the women will receive their share later in life, after their parents have died. No evidence was found that there had been a change in inheritance practices since the time of the previous Jhagrapur study. Distance to marriage village turned out to be an important factor in inheritance. Significantly more women who were married within the village or its immediate neighbouring villages inherited land than women who were married further away. In other words, proximity to the natal village is the main factor that influences women’s inheritance. Except for poor peasant women, education and class did not seem to be an important factor in whether women inherit land or not. However, although women received land, especially for middle and poor peasant women it has been difficult to hold on to their land. This brings us to another aspect of women’s land ownership, the issue of women’s control over their land, which may well be the critical factor in women’s ownership of land. The final part of this chapter deals with various aspects of the issue of control over land.

\(^{174}\) Significant at p=$<.01$. 
7.6 Women’s control over land

Control over land is a dimension of empowerment as it gives decisionmaking power and choice about the use of the land and its produce. The three examples of Halima, Selima and Hazera at the beginning of this chapter illustrated that control over land is a key issue. Halima had lost all her inherited land to big peasants who could cheat her because she was illiterate and lived far away from her natal village. Selima, who was from a rich influential family, was well in control of the land that she inherited from her father and from her husband, while Hazera preferred not to have any land in her name as she feared that it would create conflict among her children. We have also seen in the preceding sections that in total almost one in four women was unable to hold on to their inherited land. Twenty-six percent of the women had lost the land that they had received; they had sold it, mostly to their brothers and in a few cases their husbands had sold the land against their wife’s wish. Thus, the crucial question is how much control do women have over the land that they own and what are the obstacles for women to have control over their land? What are the practices in Jhagrapur and what are the main factors that play a role in women’s control over land? Has land been registered in women’s names? Do women manage the land themselves? Do they take their own decisions about the use of the land and its produce? Can they decide about selling or mortgaging the land, or giving it to someone else? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the following subsections.

Ancestral land

The gender norm that women are dependent on men for their maintenance and the non-recognition of their roles in the production process, make it difficult for women to take care of their own land properly and to have direct control over it. Women are forced to leave the cultivation to someone else and a lot of the land inherited by women in Jhagrapur remains in the control of their brothers. Many women give their land in sharecrop to their brothers or sell it to them and many brothers clearly take advantage of the patriarchal norms regarding property and gender roles. This makes a woman’s relationship with her brothers important. Depending on the character of the brothers and their relationship with them, women either receive their full share of land and its produce, or not and often women get less than their full share, and sometimes even nothing at all. In some cases, this is with their own consent, as in the case of Hanifa, a rich peasant woman, who is from a neighbouring village. She told me in 2007:

My father and mother both had land. My mother had 1 bigha, she sold it to her brother long back for Tk 300. I don’t know how much land my father had, he died long ago, but I got 1 bigha of my father’s land. My three brothers always used that land; they didn’t give me anything. I didn’t want to take that land, what do I do with my share? Then my brothers’ sons said 8, 9 months ago: ‘We will take your land’. So I gave it to them. It was registered in their names, four of them, each took their share. I got Tk 14,000 for it. I bought a mobile phone for my son and a cow.
The market value of land was around Tk 60,000 per *bigha* at that time, so Hanifa received much less for her land than she should have. Not only do many not have control over the fruits of their inherited land, many also told me that their brothers did not allow them to sell their land, unless they sold it to them. So, if they wanted to sell their land they had no other choice than to sell it to their brothers and if they were to sell it to outsiders, their brothers would get angry. So keeping a good relationship with their brothers does play a role. Brothers feel that they have the exclusive right to buy their sister’s land and that much below the market value as it is part of their ancestral property. Ancestral property has a special connotation and is regarded differently than purchased land. A family’s concern is to keep their ancestral land intact as Rahman & Van Schendel (1997) have argued. If a sister were to sell her land to outsiders, their ancestral land would become fragmented as in that case an outsider would own a piece of land amidst the family’s ancestral land. The fear then is that their land ownership might be challenged more easily. Brothers like to keep their ancestral property together, which will better enable them to protect it. In a similar way, if a woman wants to sell the land that she has inherited from her mother, she mostly sells it to her mother’s brothers. Most women take it as an established fact that they can sell their land only to their brothers and that they get a low price for it. Nevertheless, a few women challenge this practice. Leila, a poor peasant woman, who has two brothers and no sisters, had inherited 0.5 *bigha* from her father. She sold her share to someone else in her paternal village at a good rate, bypassing her brothers. The latter were very angry with her and she is no longer in contact with them. In fact, Leila did not decide to sell her land herself; her youngest son forced her to do so. Leila told me in 2006:

> My son wanted me to sell my land as he wanted to start a business. I sold it two years ago to someone in my parent’s village for Tk 35,000. I gave my son Tk 15,000 and I bought a cow for Tk 10,000. After two years my son stopped his business as he was running at a loss. …No, I didn’t sell my land to my brothers, to some other people. My brothers were very angry, I have no more relationship with them. …I also gave Tk 7000 to one of my brothers to help him go abroad, he went to Libya 2 years ago, but we have not heard from him since, no letter, nothing. All enquiries failed. We also could not trace the middleman whom he had paid Tk 230,000 to go abroad, even though he was from the same village but he lives in Dhaka and his parents say they do not know where he is.

So in the end, Leila had lost both her land and her relationship with her brothers and all she had left was a cow.

A few women who sold their inherited land did so to buy land in their in-laws village with the money from the sale. In that way they (or their husbands or sons) could have closer control over it. Amina, a small peasant woman told me:

> I inherited 1.5 *bigha* of land from my father. I sold it and bought 0.25 *bigha* of land and a 0.5 *bigha pukur* [pond] here and also a buffalo cart.
...The 0.25 bigha is registered on my name, but the pukur is not yet registered; we did not have money for it yet. I want to get it registered in the names of my 5 sons.

Amina clearly had some control over her inheritance share. She chose to invest it in resources that would benefit her whole family and also give herself some security with land registered in her own name. Similarly, Rafiqua, a rich peasant woman, told me that she had sold part of the 2.5 bigha of land that her father had registered in her name to outsiders and had bought a plot of land in Jhagrapur, a cow and had spent Tk 10,000 for her daughter’s marriage. She had not yet taken the rest of her land. Both women managed to take control of at least part of the land that they had inherited.

Gender roles
Because women have been made dependent on men for their maintenance and they do not work on the land, most women give their land in sharecrop to their brothers, but in some cases a woman’s land is cultivated by her husband or her sons. As we have seen before, women who are from Jhagrapur itself are more likely to inherit land from their father. Their land is mostly cultivated by their husbands or, if he is too old or no longer alive, by their sons. If a woman’s relationship with her husband and sons is good she may have indirect control over her land. She can discuss land matters with her husband and have influence on the use of it. As one middle peasant woman told me: “I know much better than my husband what we need for the household. So if I tell him to cultivate mustard seeds because cooking oil is too expensive to buy he does that.” And a small peasant woman said:

We discuss everything together. If my husband asks me whether to sow musuri dal, then I say: ‘But the land is far away and then goats might eat it, so we better grow wheat.’ Then we grow wheat.

But there are also women who have no power to discuss anything with their husband and some do not even know what he cultivates. If the relationship with the husband is bad, it can be even a disadvantage for a woman to be married in the village itself. One woman told me that her husband had sold her land without her knowledge or consent. Another woman’s husband had sold her mother’s land and had not given anything to her mother. The mother was old and could not say anything. When I asked her whether she had not protested against her husband (who was also present), he said: “If she says anything, I will give her talak [divorce].” His wife then said:

I cannot do anything, my husband beats me. I cannot run away, how would I feed my children? I have no job. How do I get peace?...Now he doesn’t beat me any more, but if I don’t give him land again to sell then he will beat me again.
Not only husbands, but also sons can grab a woman’s land. Several widows told me that their sons had taken their land for themselves or sold their land against their wish. Khadija told me in 2006:

My parents died when I was young. My mama [maternal uncle] brought me up and married me off. I inherited 9 bigha from him. Now my sons have registered my land in their name, they took my fingerprint. They said they needed money, I don’t know for what.

Her youngest son overheard what she said and told me: “She still has 2.5 bigha left.” Then Khadija added: “My youngest son is OK, he works and takes care of me, but my eldest son sells everything and eats up everything.” Khadija’s husband was a rich peasant. After his death the year before, she stayed with her two sons and their wives. Her sons control all the land and had meanwhile sold 6.5 of her 9 bigha of land. Khadija has no control over her land. She had a good life when her husband was still alive and never bothered about land matters. Several other widows are in the same position. Fatima inherited 1.5 bigha from her husband, who was a middle peasant, but her four sons sold her land against her wish and she became fully dependent on them. Her sons promised to take turns in giving her food and clothes, but a few years later only two of her sons still took care of her and she felt insecure about her future. Women are mostly dependent on their husbands and sons for their survival, even if they own some land. Many of them feel that they have no other choice than to comply with their husbands’ or sons’ wishes; otherwise they may not take care of them any more.

Nevertheless, Khadija and Fatima are much better off than some other widows whose sons have taken their mother’s land and do not take care of their mother at all as in the case of Latifa who lives with her divorced daughter. Her husband was a small peasant and left a small piece of land. In 1975 she was still together with her son, and although they had to struggle to survive, she was a bit better off then. But since her son has his independent household he has taken almost all of the little land they had. Latifa has only 0.2 bigha of land left but that land has long been mortgaged and she has nothing else left to live off than her VGF food rations, her daughter’s irregular income from whatever work she can get, and the charity of her neighbours and relatives.

**Land registration**

Finally, land registration customs and rules are a factor in women’s control over land. It is quite common in Bangladesh that all the inherited land remains registered in the deceased father’s or mother’s names, sometimes till many years after their deaths. Even the registration for purchased land is sometimes completed much later. The reason for this, as several people told me, is that the registration procedure is a hassle and the expenses for registration are high. People do not feel the need for registration of their inherited land in their own names as it is recorded that they are the lawful heirs anyway. In the words of one woman: “It will automatically
be recorded that father is dead and who are the heirs.” This puts women in a weaker position as usually their brothers have the land documents in their possession and with them all the necessary information about the land. These documents give the latter more power over the land and they can use it to coerce their sister to register her share in their names or in the names of their sons. Brothers also actively discourage their sisters from registering their share in their own names. When I asked a middle peasant woman whether the 2 bigha that she inherited from her father was registered in her name she told me:

No one does that [registration], because if I die then my brother’s son will get half of the land. If it is registered on my name then only my son will get it all.

So, obviously, her brother does not want the land to be registered in her name and told her that nobody registers inherited land in his or her name. Another trick that brothers use to keep the land in their possession and deny their sisters their share is to take the land benami, as we have seen in section 7.4.

**Against the odds**

So, for most women it is difficult to keep their inherited land directly under their control, even if they have been married in the village itself. Nevertheless, there are women who do manage their land themselves (Plate 57) although sometimes at a price. Given the prevailing gender norms that women are dependent on men for their maintenance, it is not surprising that most women who manage their land themselves are widows with no sons or only young school-going sons, or women whose husbands are absent. Circumstances force them to take on these tasks themselves and they are freer in their movements. At the beginning of this
chapter, we have seen the example of Selima who was widowed when most of her children were still young. She managed the cultivation of her 30 bigha of land together with her sons and grandson and kept the control over her land in her own hands.

Sharifa is another widow who manages the land herself. Her husband died all of a sudden while her two sons were still very young. When her husband was still alive, they were middle peasants and next to their 3 bigha of land they also had an income from his tailoring which made them self-sufficient. Sharifa complained that it is very difficult for her to manage the cultivation herself, arrange for the inputs, hire day labourers, and so on. Because of purdah norms she feels she cannot supervise the labourers directly as she fears that people will talk bad about her. So, it is difficult for her to control and check on the day labourers and it is not easy for her to keep an eye on her land. One day in 1998 Sharifa expressed her worries: “I still couldn’t arrange for the paddy to be brought from the field. Since a few days it has been raining and I am afraid that it will get stolen”. A few months later she told me that for the next crop she finally decided to give all her 3 bigha of land in contract. “Whatever happens, profit or loss, I will get 15 maund paddy for it, the rest of the harvest will be for the contractor.” Even though it was actually a loss for her, as the total yield of the three bigha would be between 30 and 40 maund paddy, Sharifa was happy about it because she was relieved of part of her burden and her worries. With her sons growing up, their situation will remain precarious for quite some more time. In 2005 she told me: “I have money tensions all the time. My sons are getting big and going to high school, I need a lot of money for them.” But then she added proudly that her elder son had come first class in 8th grade and her younger son was also doing very well in school which gave her hope for the future.

A rich peasant widow who manages the cultivation of her land herself is Munira. She has a son who is in high school and a younger daughter. After her husband died, she decided to arrange for the cultivation of their land herself. In 2004 she told me:

It is difficult to be alone, difficult to arrange for everything. We have five bigha of land; everything is cultivated by day labourers. I arrange for them myself and I often go to the field to see whether everything they are doing is alright. …Yes, people talk bad about me, but I don’t listen to them. My son has a teacher who comes home for tuition and my in-laws said that I have a relationship with that teacher, but that’s not true. I have already been married; I don’t need to marry a second time. I arranged tuition for my son because education is important. …It is very difficult to be alone.

Rather than entrusting her son with the management of their land, Munira took it up herself despite the insults that she had to take from her in-laws. She realised that education is important for her son’s future and wanted him to continue. The
hope that this will give him more opportunities from which she will probably benefit in future as well motivated her to defy gender norms.

Another category of women who managed the land themselves are women whose husband was abroad. One example is Farida, the rich peasant woman who purchased land in her own name when her husband was in the Gulf, as we saw earlier in this chapter. Farida clearly is self-confident. All the years that her husband was abroad she managed their land herself hiring day labourers and arranging for the necessary inputs. When I asked her how others reacted to this, she said that she has had no problems. Whenever she felt the need, she discussed things with her husband on the phone and they took decisions together. But in 2006 after her husband had returned home for good after eight years abroad, life changed again for Farida. She told me: “I am not happy now. All the time I was doing everything myself and I moved around freely. Now he has taken over again and I can’t just go anywhere, if I do he will beat me.” So after her husband had come back, Farida was once more subjugated by him. She had to readjust to his control and resented it. Her freedom and control over land affairs had lasted only as long as her husband was away.

The above examples indicate some of the factors that make control of land difficult for women. Most of these factors are related to patriarchal norms and values. To summarise, the main factors that constrain a woman’s control are first of all the norm that women are dependent on their father, husband and sons for their maintenance. Secondly, connected to the above, is the fact that women do not cultivate land and are dependent on male labour power for cultivation. Thirdly, a combination of the first two factors, and the importance given to keeping a family’s ancestral lands of the patrilineage intact, gives a woman’s brothers power over her inheritance share. Complicated and expensive registration procedures are another factor. Moral values of women’s honour and chastity that impose restrictions on women’s contact with men outside the family also make it more difficult for a woman to manage her own land as she risks being stigmatised. Despite these factors, there are women who manage the cultivation of their land themselves. These are mostly widows and divorced women and women whose husbands are abroad and who had no adult sons staying with them. These women had no men to control them and so they defied gender norms and had control over their own land and its produce showing that marital status and male migration are also factors in women’s control over land. A few other women sold their land to their brothers (albeit for a low price) and bought land in Jhagrapur, in some cases in their own name, so that they could enjoy the fruits of it more directly. Another way that women have control over land, at least to some extent, is by using their practical experience in running the household and their knowledge about risk factors involved in cultivation to suggest cultivation of certain crops that are more useful for the running of the household. On the whole, it is very difficult for women to maintain control over their land. If the question of control is not solved, the impact of women’s ownership of land on their position in the household and society is reduced.
7.7 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented data on women’s ownership of land in Jhagrapur. Inheritance is the most important way for women to obtain land; more than one in three women have received their inheritance share. Contrary to what is usually reported in the literature, the data of this study indicate that it is not true that most women renounce their inheritance share in order to keep good relations with their brothers. There were no indications that nowadays more women get or claim their inheritance share than before. By comparing inheritance figures from 1975 and 2007 of the same group of women, it turned out that in 1975 almost one out of three women had inherited land, while by 2007 three out of four of these same women had inherited land. Thus, many women had inherited their share at a later age, only after their parents had died. Life cycle and age turned out to be an important factor in whether women had received their share.

I also examined factors that possibly enable or constrain women to claim their inheritance share and whether there is a correlation between women’s inheritance of land and class, village exogamy and education. There were no indications that there is a class difference in the percentage of women who received their land share. The data indicated that constraints faced by women to claim their land are largely determined by existing patriarchal norms and structures. Dominant gender relations and gender ideology make it difficult, not only for a woman to claim her share, but, more importantly, to control and hold on to the land once received. Distance from Jhagrapur to a woman’s natal village turned out to be an important factor in whether women receive their share or not. Significantly more women who are married within the village or to someone in one of the immediately neighbouring villages had inherited land than women who came from further away. It was argued that this is related to strategies to extend influence in the village rather than to protection of ancestral lands. Education did not turn out to be a factor in whether women had inherited or not, except for the poor classes. But, contrary to expectations, poor peasant women without education were more likely to inherit land than educated women. This was explained by the fact that educated women are expected to have more chances of finding a job.

The issue of women’s control over land turned out to be the most important issue with regard to women’s ownership of land. One in four women who had inherited land had lost their land again. They had mostly sold it to their brothers at a much lower price than the market rate, or their husband or sons had sold it against their wish. Factors that constrain control are mostly related to the gender ideology that men are the producers and women the dependents, and gender norms and values, such as exogamous marriages and the gender division of labour. For women, control over land is in fact more important than ownership itself. To enable full control over land, women should no longer be seen as dependents, but their role in the production process needs to be recognised. This also requires a change in the mindset of people.
Next, I will provide an analysis of what ownership of land means for women’s empowerment and for their position in conjugal, domestic and kinship relations and in the village power structure.
In this chapter, I address the question: what impact does women’s land ownership have on their agency and the power women have in the various arenas, such as in marital relations, the household, the family and society? Do women who own land have more power and influence in their household and in society than women who do not own land? Are they more in control of their own lives? And does land ownership give women, individually or collectively, more power to challenge or change gender relations and gender inequalities in the household and/or community, as Agarwal (1994) has argued? In other words, is there a link between women’s land ownership and their position in the household and in society?

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the issue of women and land is complicated. The examples of Halima, Hazera and Selima in the previous chapter indicated that women’s relations to land differ and the link between women’s land ownership and empowerment is not straightforward. Halima was living as a beggar because she lost all of the 12 bigha of land that she had inherited from her father to rich peasants who cheated her. Marital residence, lack of education, and the position of her natal family in the village are some of the factors that made it easy for these rich peasants to cheat her. By contrast, Selima was able to hold on to her land after her husband died as she was from an influential family and was protected by some powerful people. In addition, she had sons who were old enough to cultivate the land. Hazera’s position was entirely different. Guided by the existing gender ideology and gender division of labour which dictate that a woman should be a good mother and housewife, she said that having land in her name might become a source of conflict with her children. Nevertheless, Hazera had considerable power in her household. Apparently, other factors besides land also play a role in the gender distribution of power, such as household composition, education/knowledge, status of natal family, gender norms, gender ideology, and personality.

The various dimensions that play a role can conflict with each other and land has a different impact on different women, depending on their position in the household, the family and society, both with regard to class and gender. Nevertheless, gender ideologies and gender norms play an important role.

In this chapter, I analyse the impact of women’s land ownership on women’s empowerment in the various arenas – conjugal relation, the household, the natal family, the community and society. These various relationships differ in character and therefore will have a different impact. How do women negotiate power at the various levels of interaction? How do existing structures constrain women’s space to have influence and how can women sometimes go around structural constraints or make use of certain aspects of the structure to exert power? Kabeer’s deconstruction of empowerment into three elements: resources (economic, human and social), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes) is useful here. Kabeer argued that the measurement of empowerment should consist of the measurement of all three. Thus, not only the availability of choice (resources) and
the process (agency) should be assessed, but also the consequences of choice, the outcome. In the context of women’s land ownership, this means the right to land and women’s agency to obtain land and to control it (which have both been addressed in the previous chapter), and choices made to utilise the land in a way that challenges or changes structural factors that constrain women’s ownership and control over land. This last element will be used here in assessing women’s empowerment and its impact.

8.1 Conjugal relations

Marriage ideology in a patriarchal society is fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand, marriage ideally means livelihood security for a woman because her husband is supposed to maintain and protect his wife and children. On the other hand, marriage creates a dependency of the wife on her husband, and after his death on her sons. In other words, whereas marriage provides security and status for women, it in turn institutionalises their dependency. As a result, many women do not dare to go against their husbands openly and accept his authority. Patriarchal marriage is one of the main mechanisms of control and subordination of women. Once, in 1975, I overheard a mother threaten her obstinate daughter: “Keep quiet, or I’ll marry you off”. Marriage puts severe constraints on women to act in their own interest. Once a woman is married and her husband turns out to be bad for her, it is difficult to find a way out, as in the case of Naima, a middle peasant woman. One day in 1999 she told me:

Marriage only gives jamela [trouble]. My husband beats me a lot, he is always angry, never talks to me, he always eats alone. Sometimes he takes me inside the house and then beats me up. He is bad. He already divorced two wives. I’m his third wife. But I can’t go back to my parents, my mother and brothers will get angry, they won’t accept it. My mother is not good, my father is good, but if I would stay my mother would get angry. What to do?

Her story illustrates the dilemma that women can find themselves in, not only in relation to men, but also to other women who have internalised social norms and values and so reinforce oppressive structures. Social images of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women, mainly defined in terms of purity and chastity, make parents push their daughters into early marriage and put a severe constraint on women to act against the norm, or, to put it differently, to exercise their agency, even in their own private sphere. If women were given a free choice and society would allow it, they might not marry at all or at a later age or to a man of their own choice. Although in Islam a woman can initiate a divorce, it is difficult for her to see a way out of a bad marriage owing to her dependency and the social consequences and stigma attached to divorce. Single and divorced women have no status, or rather a negative status, and therefore it is not surprising that most women feel that they have no choice but to stay with their husbands and obey them, even more so if they have no one to fall back on, like Naima.
When I did the survey on women’s land ownership in the village in 2006/2007, I asked all the women and some men about the decision-making process between husband and wife. I asked who took decisions regarding cultivation, land purchase or sale, expenditure, marriage, education of their children, and so on. Most women and men told me that they discuss everything together and take decisions jointly. But when I questioned them further, often women told me that their husband had the final say in major matters such as marriage and the education of their children or the selling and buying of land, while she herself could decide about day-to-day matters, such as purchasing things for the household or selling chicken and eggs (Plate 58). Many women told me that they did not quarrel with their husband over the decisions he took.

Some women cannot discuss anything at all with their husbands; they feel that they do not have anything to say and simply have to listen to their husbands, while others prefer to avoid serious confrontation and keep quiet even if they do not agree. What Rumana, Anselma and Mariama told me is exemplary for many women (Box 8.1). Rumana, and many women like her, discuss matters with their husbands but if they do not agree they remain silent to keep the peace and avoid an argument and not to be ridiculed by others. For Rumana it is important to be regarded by others as a ‘good’, obedient wife and she is prepared to give up her own views or interests for this. Both Mariama and Anselma are middle-aged women with grown up children who have inherited some land which is cultivated by their husbands, but there is no space for them to decide on important matters. Apparently their landed status does not give them power in their marital relation. But whereas Mariama’s fear is
that she may lose her husband if she doesn’t listen to him, Anselma, like Rumana, is more concerned about what other people may say about her and fears to be blamed and stigmatised. These women prefer to maintain their image of a good obedient wife, as they fear the consequences if they go against their husbands. Although Mariama has to obey her husband’s decisions on major issues, she can discuss matters with him, but Anselma feels that she has no power at all and has to comply with the norms of society and to whatever her husband says; otherwise there is no peace in the house and she risks being beaten up by him.

Box 8.1 Rumana, Anselma and Mariama have to listen to their husbands

Rumana and her husband are poor peasants; they have two young daughters. Her husband inherited 1 bigha from his father. Besides, he has taken some land in lease and also works as a day labourer. Rumana takes care of their animals. The money she earns from selling chicken and eggs and occasionally a goat is used for the household and for further construction of their brick house. When I asked Rumana who in their household decides about what, she said: “My husband and I discuss everything together and we take decisions together.” But when I asked her: “What if you want your daughter to continue in school but your husband wants to marry her off, what then?” She laughed and said: “Then we have to marry her.”

When I asked further: “Don’t you argue with your husband about it?” she replied: “No, we don’t quarrel. If you quarrel people will make fun of you.”

Anselma, a middle peasant woman, has inherited 0.8 bigha of land from her father who was a rich peasant in a nearby village and her husband cultivates her land. She has nothing to say in her marriage. Even though she owns some land, she has no negotiating power: “My husband decides everything. Can I do family planning without my husband saying it? …He will give our daughter in marriage to whomever he wants. Can I say anything? I don’t know anything. …I am afraid of love marriages, my daughter may run away with a boy. People will talk bad and I will feel ashamed. I have to listen to my husband. Kharap bole sunte hobe, bhalo bole sunte hobe, ja bole ta sunte hobe [If he talks bad I have to listen, if he talks good I have to listen, whatever he talks I have to listen].” “And if you don’t listen?” I asked. “Then there is oshanti [unhappiness].” Anselma has been beaten severely by her husband several times. Then I asked: “Are women who do not listen to their husband bad?” “Yes, isn’t it, loke ninda kore” [people blame them], she replied.

Mariama, a poor peasant woman, also emphasised obedience to her husband, but she discussed matters with him too: “We discuss
things together, but my husband takes almost all the decisions. About family planning we decided together, after 5 children. How can we feed more children? I take injections. We also discussed our daughter’s marriage, but if I had not agreed with his choice the decision would have been his. You have to listen to your husband, don’t you?” The only 2 bigha of land that Mariama and her husband have is the land that Mariama has inherited from her mother. Her land is near the village and her husband cultivates it. When I asked Mariama whether she could sell her land if she wanted to, even if her husband was against it, she repeated again: “No, I have to listen to him. If I don’t listen to him he will send me away.” So even though all the land that they have is Mariama’s, she still feels she has no say in major matters concerning her land. Her husband controls everything. Mariama does not have any money of her own. “If I need something, my husband will give it, but he won’t give any money for luxuries.” So Mariama feels she is fully dependent on her husband for her livelihood, even though she owns land, because she has no control over it.

Whereas for Anselma and Rumana obedience is a matter of social norms, for Mariama listening to her husband is more a matter of livelihood security. Even though she has land, she has no control over it. It is important to note here that both Anselma and Rumana did not say that they subscribe to the patriarchal norm that a woman should obey her husband, but rather that they fear the consequences if they did not comply with that norm. Hence it cannot be concluded that they have internalised the norm or that they have a ‘false consciousness’, as is sometimes argued by scholars about women in similar situations. Both Anselma and Mariama belong to an older generation that has not learnt to talk back as much. They fear that talking back will make things worse for them.

Women are often trapped in marriage and subject to various kinds of physical and mental abuse, even if they own some land or other resources. If a woman’s husband cultivates her land and so has de facto control over it, she is dependent on him and he often acts as he likes. Rafiqua, a poor peasant woman told me, in the presence of her husband, that he had sold her mother’s land against her own and her mother’s wishes. This was clearly an indirect protest addressed to her husband. She said that he had not given a single paisa (cent) to her mother who was from a neighbouring village and whose father had been a rich peasant. When I asked Rafiqua whether she had said anything about it to her husband, she replied: “What can I say.” And her husband added: “If she says something I will give talak [divorce].” I said a bit jokingly to Rafiqua: “In that case I would leave if I were you.” But she objected: “But what about my children? How will I feed them? No chakri [job] here. How do I get shanti [peace]?” Rafiqua’s mother’s land has in fact led to (the threat of) violence and of divorce from her husband’s side, rather than that it being a source of negotiating power for Rafiqua, or her mother. The character of
her husband and sons and their willingness to use violence, as well as a woman’s own character and intelligence, are factors that play a role in her control over her land.

The above examples indicate that land ownership does not necessarily give a woman greater negotiating power in her marital relation. Gender norms are deeply rooted and it is difficult for women to go against them. Patriarchal moral standards are also promoted by women themselves often serving to assert their own superior position their own ‘good’ character. In 2002, a rich peasant woman told me that Lupna, a landless divorced woman, had taken poison after a quarrel with her daughter-in-law. When I commented that Lupna had a hard life, the rich peasant woman said:

That [hard life] was not necessary. She was married but she didn’t like her husband, so she came back. Then she married again and again she came back. Then she got pregnant from an unknown man. That was when you lived in the village. I feel no pity for her; it is bad to take poison. If life is difficult, you have to bear it and take it. She is much older than her daughter-in-law, so she should have been wiser.

Some women feel stronger if they choose to comply with gender norms and ideology; in such cases their agency reinforces existing oppressive structures. For women it is often a survival tactic to comply with the dominant norms as they fear that their husband may turn violent or leave them and so jeopardise their perceived livelihood security. An understandable reaction of women to this is to keep silent and avoid being beaten up by keeping the peace. They feel that they have no other choice, even more so if they have nowhere to go. For instance Rahana, a small peasant woman, told me:

My husband is no good. He is always gone, but he doesn’t allow me to go anywhere. If I hadn’t had any children I wouldn’t stay with him. It is OK to stay at home when your husband is alright, but he is not good, he beats me. I can’t go to my parents, I have no sisters and my brothers don’t care. My mother says I have to bear it all; what can I do?

Like Apter and Garnsey’s example in chapter 2 of the Chinese mother who binds her daughter’s feet to protect her from being unable to conclude a marriage, which she regards as worse than mutilating her daughter, Rahana’s mother believes that being divorced is worse than being beaten up and so it is in her daughter’s best interest to stay with her husband. Without the support from her natal family, Rahana sees no possibility to go against the patriarchal norms and break out of her bad relationship.

**Violence**

In line with Visaria (2008), I found that through violence or the threat of using violence men both set and enforce societal norms regarding ‘proper’ women’s
behaviour and assert their masculinity and authority over women. Male violence is a common phenomenon in marriage and the statement of Anselma above that it is necessary to listen to your husband whatever he says, is an indication that women think that they are the cause of beatings by their husbands if they do not comply with the societal norms. At the same time, however, women defy men’s authority and do not comply with patriarchal norms imposed on them, even though they risk being beaten up or even being killed. The gender ideology that women are subordinate to their husband and should obey him, functions as a kind of permit for men to use violence to ‘put their wives in the right place’. The example in Box 8.2 illustrates how men justify their violence against their wives.

**Box 8.2 Two kilos of meat**

On *Eid* in 2006, I stopped by Inu’s homestead. His wife was not there at that moment. They are rich peasants. When I asked Inu about their land and whether his wife owned any land he told me that his wife inherited 1.2 *bigha* from her father and expected to get 3 *bigha* more after her mother’s death. The following conversation developed:

J.A.: “Would you agree if your wife wants to sell her land?”
Inu: “Yes.”
J.A.: “What if you want to sell your wife’s land and she doesn’t want that?”

A neighbour who had joined us in the meantime said: “Then he will beat her.”

Inu laughed and admitted that he had beaten his wife that very morning: “My wife told me to buy two kilos of meat, but I said: ‘No, it costs Tk 300’ When she insisted, I beat her and then I angrily bought the meat.”

J.A.: “How much did you buy?”
Inu: “Two kilos.”
J.A.: “Can your wife also beat you?”
Inu: “No, then it is three times *talak* [divorce].”
J.A.: “Why do you beat her?”
Inu: “She doesn’t listen to me.”
J.A.: “Do you always listen to your wife?”
Inu: “It is my house. If my wife doesn’t listen to me, she will run off to another man. Many women here do that.”

Inu tried to assert his authority over his wife by beating her and felt that he had the full right to do so as it was ‘his’ house. Nevertheless, he did what his wife had asked him to do, buy two kilograms of meat, even though he thought it was too expensive. Many men (and some women) regard beating as a justified instrument for a husband to discipline his wife if she does not listen to him. But apparently, Inu also felt insecure that his wife might leave him. What is generally not talked about is that men are also dependent on women. The patriarchal gender ideology...
of men having to provide for women makes a woman dependent on her husband for her survival and obscures the fact that men are equally, if not more, dependent on women (Plate 59). Yet there is an essential difference. Men are dependent on women, not only for bearing them children, but also for their physical well-being, for providing them with food, clean clothes, a clean house, for their emotional care and not in the last place the satisfaction of their sexual desires. But, since male dependency on women does not fit in the prevailing masculine ideology of male strength and superiority, this dependency is generally obscured or denied. It is regarded against a man’s honour. Although men will not admit it openly, they sometimes express their dependency on their wife’s care in an indirect way. For instance, one day in 1999 when I had a conversation about women’s and men’s work with a group of men and women who were winnowing paddy, one man said jokingly: “If we say that women have more work than men we may have to start cooking”. Everybody laughed, but men’s hidden dependency on women is an important reason why men feel the need to keep their wives under control. In fact, as a man does not know how to take care of himself, he may be equally scared to lose his wife if she gets more power, but he will never openly admit that.

I did not study the issue of violence systematically and have no systematic data on the frequency and number of women beaten up by their husbands. On the basis of my observations, it is difficult to draw a conclusion on whether violence against women has increased or decreased, or whether there is any relation between (absence of) violence and women’s land ownership; this needs further research. My impression is that both women who own land and those who do not own
land face violence. During my recent fieldwork, as well as in 1974/75, I heard or witnessed that women had been beaten up, mostly by their husbands, but also sometimes by their sons or other relatives. There have also been very dramatic incidents of violence and I heard of three women who have been killed. One rich peasant woman was killed by her husband because of her extra-marital affair, a poor peasant woman was killed by her lover for reasons unknown to me and I also heard about the killing of a middle peasant woman of which I did not find out any details. Each of these killings took place before 1998. I also heard of nine women who had committed suicide since 1975, two of them during the period of this study. One middle peasant woman hung herself after a fight with her brother over land and a divorced landless woman took poison after a quarrel with her daughter-in-law. I also heard of one woman who had hung herself after she had been forced into *hilla* (see chapter 6.7). I did not witness or hear of any of the relatively new forms of violence such as stalking or acid throwing attacks which are regularly reported in newspapers.

Women also resist male violence. They protest against their husband’s beatings, for instance, by going on a hunger strike or by refusing to cook. I have also witnessed women going up to a man’s house in a group to protest against his beatings after a woman had been severely beaten up by her husband.

In contrast to the women who say that they have to listen to their husband, there are women who are in de facto control of the household and income, and who take major decisions. One of them is Hamida (Box 8.3) who has more decision-making power than her husband. Nevertheless, she also emphasises that they decide everything together and that they have a good relationship. Her intelligence, her strong personality and her management skills are important factors in the control that she can assert over her husband. In fact, Hamida has control over her husband who accepts benefitting from her intelligence and good management skills. In Hamida’s case more personal factors such as character, skills, intelligence and a good relation with her husband clearly play a role.

Another woman, Rakhia, has quite some influence in her household as well. She and her husband are poor peasants but their economic status is on the rise. Rakhia is mostly in control of the household income. It is possible that her class background is a factor in the influence that she has over her husband (Box 8.4).

**Box 8.3 Hamida: „I am intelligent”**

Hamida and her husband Abul both originate from poor peasant families in Jhagrapur. Hamida’s father died long ago but her mother is still alive and lives with her youngest brother. Her mother has inherited four *bigha* of land from her husband. “I will take my share of land only after my mother has died”, Hamida told me in 1998 when I
visited their new house on the outskirts of the village.\textsuperscript{177} “We have just moved to this house. We made three rooms, one room each for our three sons when they get married. Our eldest son just got married; we are still together. He has a little shop there on the main road in the village.” She and her husband decided together about their son’s marriage. When I asked Hamida whether her husband listens to her, she said: “If he doesn’t want to listen to me, I tell him: ‘Amar buddhi besi’ [I am more intelligent] and then he smiles. We are doing very well; we got everything by working hard and saving. We have 7 bigha of land now; 15 years back we bought our first 5 katha of land, after that we bought 10 katha, and so on. Bit by bit we got everything. I never bought any jewellery and I buy only cheap saris. That way we could slowly buy land. 1.5 bigha has been registered in my name; the rest is in my husband’s name. We also have some land in sharecrop. I raise chickens, ducks, goats and cows and my husband also works as day labourer. ‘Amar buddhi achhe’ [I am intelligent], I have worked it out well.”

A year later Hamida told me: “We cultivate more land now than we need, so we can save some money. Last year we sold 100 maund paddy. From that money we cultivated tobacco, but we lost 10,000 Taka. Part of the tobacco got burnt because our curing shed was not good and we couldn’t sell the tobacco well because we didn’t have a company card. We will try again this year. From the profit of the tobacco we may then be able to buy some land again. But it is very difficult to buy land now, it has become very expensive, Tk 80,000 per bigha.”

Due to Hamida’s strategising and management skills their household has done very well, they have become self-sufficient middle peasants and their class position is still rising.

---

\textbf{Box 8.4 Rakhia had to give up her shop}

Rakhia is from a rich peasant family in another village; her husband’s father was a small peasant. He inherited 2 bigha of land from his father long ago and they bought a small plot. In 2006 Rakhia told me: “…I take care of the goats and chickens and keep all the money when I sell a goat or chicken. I decide what to do with the money. If my husband needs money, I give him. And if I need something for myself, I take it. I helped my eldest son get a job. He had heard that the Navy was recruiting. He talked to his father and then to me. I had made some money by selling goats and chickens and gave it to him to go to Khulna for the interview. He went with a few others from the village. When he had to go for his first duty, I gave him money for clothes and other things that he needed.” Their younger son also has
a job. Until their marriages her sons sent money home regularly, but “now they give money only to their wives”.

When I met her in 2007, she had just set up a small shop in their compound to sell diesel oil “because my husband is always very angry and he might leave one day”, she explained. “I discussed it with my son and my husband. There is no such shop in the village and people always need diesel to run their shallow tube well pumps and power tillers. So I thought that such a shop would be good.” But when I visited her house again a year later the shop was gone. Rakhia whispered: “I can calculate but he [referring to her husband who was elsewhere in the compound] could not do the calculations properly, so we were running a loss and had to give it up.” So although Rakhia has quite some influence in the household, she could not keep full control over the shop.

Rakhia expects to inherit land in the future: “My father is still alive, he had 30, 35 bigha of land, but when my brothers went separate he couldn’t cultivate it any more. He is too old to work on the land, so he sold 5-10 bigha. He has told me that I will get land.” Her husband overheard this and disagreed: “No he will never give, that is only to smear honey [i.e. to please her].” But Rakhia insisted that her father would give her land. “If he doesn’t give I will finish him, bab khub bodmas [father is very wicked].” She has no land in her name yet: “He [pointing at her husband] does not want to register land in my name.” Her husband adds in a joking way: “If I give, then she will run away”. Apparently he perceives land ownership as a means for his wife to be independent and perceives this as a threat. The fact that his wife is from a higher class background than himself and is likely to inherit some land may add to his insecurity.

The above examples indicate that there is not a direct relationship between women’s land ownership and the influence that a woman has on her husband. If a woman owns land this does not automatically mean that she has power in her marital relation, or the other way around. From most of the examples it can be concluded that the gender ideology of male domination and women’s submission is a strong factor in how much influence a wife has on her husband. Men do not tolerate women who question their authority and if they are denied their authority they may resort to violence or at least threaten to use violence. Even so, as we have seen in the case of Hamida, there are exceptions to this. A lot depends on the woman’s own skills and assertiveness and also on whether she has a good relationship with her husband (Plate 60).
Domestic relations

As much of the literature on households points out, households are not unitary entities where all members have the same interests (Folbre 1986; Wolf, 1990; Agarwal, 1994). Different members have different interests and these interests may clash with each other. Power relations within the household determine whose interest will be pursued. The husband is the head of the household and after the husband’s death his authority is taken over by his sons. Like their father, sons often control their mother and her property. Hence, sons can equally restrict a woman’s independence and her space to negotiate, especially when she is a widow. Yet, some widows manage to control their sons as we have seen from the example of Selima who managed the cultivation of her land and kept her land strictly under her control after her husband died (Chapter 7). Some women openly defy their husband and, if necessary, align with their sons to get what they want as in the case of Hazera who entered an alliance with her son when her husband opposed the purchase of a piece of land that she wanted for her ducks to roam (Chapter 7). Hazera did not want to have land in her own name but she has considerable power in her household (Box 8.5). Persons with less power sometimes adopt strategies that can result in their own interest being served.

Like Hazera, female heads of joint households often have more power than they would have in a nuclear household. There is a clear hierarchy between the women in a joint household where the mother is usually in control of their daughters-in-law who have to do most of the daily household chores.
Hazera and her husband live in a joint household with their son, his wife and their daughter. Her son manages the cultivation of their five bigha of land and her daughter-in-law does most of the cooking, cleaning and other daily household chores. Hazera is in control of the household income. In 1999 she explained to me: “You should always look at spending and income. If you spend more than your income you become poor again. Ratan’s father just buys things. He doesn’t look at the price and our income. I always do. Nowadays vendors charge much higher prices. It was not like that before. If something costs Tk 5, they say Tk 10. He does not know that so he just pays whatever they ask, but I tell the vendor ‘no, it is only Tk 5.’ …I always keep something, never finish everything. If a vehicle can move 10 km: you should not go 20 km., because then it will break down. If you go 8 km you have some left. I always calculate how much paddy we need for the household, so I know how much to keep from the harvest so that in the end we don’t need to buy paddy when the price is high. This harvest we had five maund paddy excess. Ratan wanted to sell it to buy fertiliser, but I objected and wanted to keep two maund extra and pay the fertiliser trader the rest of the money only after getting his father’s salary. It is good we kept those two maund, that is what we are eating now. Many people have to buy rice now at Tk 12 to 13 while the whole year it was only Tk 10. It is because the new paddy is not yet ripe due to the unusual rains.” Hazera then quoted a poem by the famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam about working hard, then you can make it. She added: “Many people do not believe that I studied only up to class 6, they think I have at least IA. You do not get educated only by reading books; in life you learn much more.”

As Agarwal (1994: 52) has pointed out: gender hierarchies also influence and structure relations between individuals of the same sex, dependent on the gendered character of their relations with the men in the household. But only a few rich families still live jointly with their married sons and their families. More and more joint households are now split up (Plate 61). Many young couples prefer to set up their own households soon after their marriage, often for economic reasons: if they have their independent household, they can keep all their income for themselves. If the sons go separate, the mother not only loses part of her domestic labour force but also the power over her daughters-in-law and with that a part of her status in the household. Moreover, sons no longer automatically take care of their parents in their old age. This makes it more difficult for these women to survive if they have no resources to fall back on. Therefore the splitting up of joint households is often

---

178 One maund is 37.65 kilos or 40 sheer.
to the dismay of the mother of the joint family. Several women exclaimed when I asked them how they were doing: “Very bad, our sons have gone separate!” One of them further explained: “Our sons wanted to keep the dowry for themselves, that’s why; otherwise they have to give it to their father.” Another woman had a slightly different opinion: “A son’s wife won’t allow her father-in-law to appropriate the dowry money. That is why couples often go separate. It happens a lot now.” But a poor peasant woman also saw an advantage in it and remarked: “Before our situation was worse, now we are all separate. If we have obhab [are in need] we are less people now, so there are fewer quarrels.” Her husband, who could hardly work any more, did not agree: “It also means less labour power and thus less income.”

Daughters-in-law are often blamed for the splitting up of joint families. As the dowry is given to the bridegroom, there is no guarantee that it is spent for the common benefit of husband and wife, although women do use their agency to negotiate with their husbands about the use of the dowry. Several men and women told me that they preferred to have their independent household, away from the control of their parents, so that they could keep the dowry and their own earnings for themselves, instead of having to share it with their parents and brothers’ families. I came across several couples that had invested the dowry in the purchase or lease of land, buying a cow or in some other way for their joint livelihood. As one woman told me in 1998:

My mother-in-law was getting one child after another, so we had no future there and went separate. With the dowry of 10,000 Taka we bought
1 bigha of land and from the harvest we bought more land, now we have 3 bigha. When my son and daughter are grown up we want to construct a brick house.

There are couples that decide together how to spend the dowry money and invest it in productive assets. This seems to be more and more the trend, in particular when the couple is landless or when they have not yet received their share of land from their parents. In this way, the dowry system can be used to a woman’s own advantage and can give her negotiating power. In her relation with her husband she can use it as an argument to split off from her husband’s joint family, get some control over the dowry herself, and move away from the control of her in-laws. She uses an existing structure of gender subordination to mould her relationship with her husband in such a way that she can have more influence in her own household.

In contrast to the above, where women use structure for their agency to modify an existing gender relation, women can also use structure for their agency to confirm rather than contest existing gender roles. Hazera did not want land in her own name because she was afraid that it would create conflict among her children and so upset her role as a nurturing mother. Tahera is another example. Her greatest source of happiness is when her children are happy. She and her husband are rich peasants and have enough surplus land so they can afford to give land or money to their children. Tahera’s husband inherited 11 bigha of land, but in the meantime 3 bigha have been sold in order to pay for operations and other medical expenses for his ill health. Tahera inherited 15 bigha from her parents, but 6 bigha have been sold to construct a nice brick house and for the marriage expenses for their two daughters. “No, no dowry, only because we were happy to give…” Tahera further elaborated:

Our eldest daughter’s husband was unemployed so we helped him set up a shop. They are doing very well now. The youngest daughter is doing very well too; they have some land. And our son is in Dhaka for job training, he is going to work abroad. If the children are happy I am happy.

So Tahera does not feel bad about having sold part of her inherited land. Rather, she feels happy that she was able to make her children happy thanks to her assets. Given a woman’s position in the household and her role as a mother, her woman’s children are often most important for her and, so, her children’s happiness comes first and gives her peace of mind. An important motive behind this may be that in their old age people are dependent for their survival on the care of their children, particularly their sons. In the above cases agency or empowerment serves to maintain the structure of established gender norms and ideology. Rather than making women stronger in their struggle against oppression, it weakens their solidarity. Moreover, reproducing dominant gender norms can lead to women reproducing prevailing prejudices and condemning other women who do
not comply with the norms. In a conversation on the position of women and the lack of employment opportunities for women, a rich peasant woman exclaimed:

Many women are bad. Meera ami support kori na [I don’t support girls/women]. Single women are only poor if they don’t work. It’s their own fault that they are poor. They don’t like to work hard; it is not necessary to be poor.

But this rich peasant woman who works hard to maintain her household in a good way completely ignores the limited possibilities that poor women have to earn an income.

The above examples show that land is not necessarily a condition for women to have power in their households. Female heads of joint family households can have considerable control, regardless of whether or not they own land. The examples also show that women can use structure for their agency, either to mould gender relations within the household or to strengthen existing gender relations.

8.3 Kinship relations

With regard to inherited land, the relationship with the natal family is the most important. To a large extent this relationship determines whether a woman inherits land from her father and/or mother and, if she inherits, how this land is managed. If a woman expects to inherit land from her parents this may be a source of empowerment for her, but at the same time it may restrict her freedom into behaving as a ‘good’ girl not to lose the sympathy of her parents and brothers and risk not getting her share. In the latter case, the prospect of inheritance strengthens patriarchal gender norms. Similarly, if a woman has received her share and her land is cultivated by her brothers, she also likes to keep her relation with them well in order to safeguard her share and therefore she may behave according to their expectations. A woman’s relationship with her natal family is an important factor in her fall-back position: the options that a woman has outside the household which determine how well off she would be in case her marital relation breaks down (Agarwal 1994: 54). As we have seen in chapter 7, about a quarter of the women did not get, or did not expect to get, their inheritance share. Most women who did not receive their share did not renounce it, but they were denied their share, either by their father or by their brothers, “Because from daughters it doesn’t stay, my father said, that is why” as one woman expressed it. Only a few women told me that they had forsaken their share voluntarily, out of love for their brothers or to avoid conflicts. Rumana, the poor peasant woman who listens to her husband to avoid quarrels, was to inherit 5 bigha from her father. Her brother wanted to work abroad and as a result of a family decision in which Rumana was also involved, part of her father’s land was sold to pay a middleman. Hence, Rumana gave up her share in favour of her brother.

Whereas women value a good relation with their brothers, they do not generally keep their brothers happy by renouncing their share. More frequently, they give
their inherited land to their brothers in sharecrop or sell it to them, often at a loss. Brothers do not always give their sisters their full share of the harvest, or in case they buy their sister’s land, they do not pay the market rate but much less, sometimes even less than half. In this way brothers take advantage of their sister’s share and women keep their brothers happy, sometimes also to their own advantage. Munira, a middle peasant woman, explained to me why she was planning to sell her share to her brothers, even though they would give much less than the market value:

Yes, but I will also have to go and see them. Otherwise I will have a bad relationship with them. I go there two/three times a year. My brothers give me clothes, gur, dal, everything that we don’t have ourselves.

So, in order to keep a good relation with their brothers, women have to accept their terms and conditions. If they do not, they risk that their brothers cut off the relationship, as happened to Leila, whose son made her sell her land to outsiders (Chapter 7). A few women received nothing at all in exchange for their share for many years, even though they have a good relation with their brothers. Hanifa, a rich peasant woman inherited 1 bigha of land that she had from her father. Her brothers cultivated her land, she never got any share of the harvest, yet she never bothered about it. After each of her brothers, except one, had died, her brother’s sons requested her to register the land in their name. She happily agreed although in return she received not even 25 percent of the actual price. After all for all these years she had not received anything for her land at all and now at lease she received some money, even if much less than the actual value.

Not all women just accept their brothers’ wishes. There are also women who have some influence on their brothers, like Nazma, a poor peasant woman. She had given the 1.5 bigha that she inherited from her mother in sharecrop to her brothers. She told me:

My brothers listen to what I want. I am their only sister. If I tell that I want them to cultivate something particular then they do that. I get my share and they also give me a new sari, blouse and skirt twice a year. I got 1.5 bigha and sold 0.3 bigha to the son of one of my brothers. This was long ago, when we had obhab [starvation]. The rest of the land my brothers are sharecropping.

At the same time, her brothers withheld part of her mother’s land that she is entitled to. Nazma said that she actually inherited 3 bigha, but that she got only 1.5 bigha. For the remaining 1.5 bigha she has to see the papers, but her brothers do not give them to her. “What can I do?” So, in that regard Nazma is powerless. She feels that she cannot do anything to make her brothers give her the rest of her share even though she has a good relationship with them and she has some influence over her land.
There is another aspect to Nazma’s arrangement with her brothers. Even though Nazma did not get her full share, she knows that her land is there for her with her brothers and that her husband cannot touch it. Her husband has mortgaged almost all of their 10 bigha, partly for dowry for the marriage of their 5 daughters, and in the course of time they have become poor peasants. Had Nazma’s husband also controlled her land, it might have been sold or mortgaged as well. So, although it makes a woman more dependent on her brothers, she may prefer to keep her land share with them instead of with her husband or sons and run the risk that they may sell or mortgage it. At least in this arrangement she will get her share of the harvest of her land and it may also give her more security. In other words, it may strengthen her fallback position. In such a case it is even more important for a woman to maintain a good relationship with her brothers as it gives her more negotiating power with her husband or sons. If a woman’s relationship with her husband is not good she may also chose to keep her land with her brothers and she may be more inclined to comply with her brothers’ wishes in order to secure their support in case her marriage breaks down. Similarly, if a woman has a good, stable marriage she may feel confident to challenge her brothers and claim her rightful share. These are important considerations for women to agree to an arrangement with her brothers, so it is not necessarily a sign of weakness as it is usually regarded. Such an arrangement can increase a woman’s negotiating power, both in relation to her husband and sons who cannot snatch away their land, and in relation to her brothers. Along the same lines, women keep a goat or cow in ‘poushani’179 in their natal home, often without their husband’s knowledge. In this way, women can get around at least some of the control of their husband and/or their sons and, besides, it gives them some additional economic security. This is another example of how women use the structure, in this case existing gender relations, in their own interest.

In conclusion, women give importance to keeping a good relationship with their brothers and they mostly do so, not by renouncing their inheritance share, but by giving their land in sharecrop or selling it to them below market value. Brothers do not give their sisters much choice, but some women negotiate with their brothers about the use of their land. It can also be a conscious choice of a woman and in her own interest to keep her land with her brothers. In case her marriage is not good, such an arrangement can prevent her husband from taking control of her property and mortgaging or selling it off against her wish.

8.4 The village power structure
Although mondols still try to impose their (double) moral standards, they cannot do this as much as they once did. An indication of women defying the authority of the village leaders can be seen from the fact that the mobility of women in public spaces has increased considerably, despite complaints from mondols and other villagers about women’s ‘indecency’. Several times men complained that

179 In a ‘poushani’ arrangement the person who takes care of the animal(s) gets half of its offspring in return.
women cannot be controlled any more, that they just move around the village as they like, do not cover their heads properly, and so on. One of the *mondols* complained to me:

Women now go everywhere, to Gangni and other places outside the village and you can’t tell them anything more that they should not, they don’t listen any more. If you tell a woman on the road that she should not be there she says: ‘Who are you, what can you tell me?’ There are also laws now that protect women. If a man wants to divorce a woman she starts a case and he has to pay.

Women cannot be told anything by others any more and I clearly noticed a change in their behaviour towards men. In the 1970s women usually behaved shy (‘lojja’) when dealing with men outside their homestead, even their own husband. It was often clear that this was more acted shyness as a proper woman was expected to behave shy in contact with men. Nowadays, as soon as men turn up in their homestead women pull their *sari* over their head, but the (often played) shyness has mostly disappeared and women talk more freely with men (Plate 62).

The changing power structure is also clear from the example of a young woman from a poor peasant family, Nahar. She is said to have caused a split in the village leadership when they wanted to interfere with her plans to marry for the fifth time.
(Box 8.6). Nahar not only defied her parents, she also defied the *mondols* and caused a split among them by showing her power through an armed gang that she was in contact with from a village in the area.

**Box 8.6 Nahar - her fifth marriage caused a split in the village leadership**

One day in late 1998 when I had just started my fieldwork, I met a young woman on the road just outside Jhagrapur, lipstick on her lips, a small handbag on her shoulder. This I had not seen before, a young woman walking on the road by herself and all dressed up. To my curious question where she was going she replied: “To Gangni. ...I have work there. I work in an office for an NGO.” As she was not very keen on talking, I continued my own way. Later I asked some friends about her. They told me: “Oh, she is Nahar, daughter of Bilal [a landless peasant]. She worked in an NGO for a while but not any more; she is no good; she has married five times already. Every time she leaves her husband, demands money from him and after some time gets married to another one. Her parents cannot control her, she does not listen to them; they cannot do anything.” Another day I was told that Nahar had caused a split in the village leadership the year before. One of the leaders had split off because he was against interfering with another marriage that Nahar intended. He was afraid that she would bring in *sontrasi*, like she had done a few years earlier when she had a love affair with a married middle peasant from the village. When villagers found out about, it the leaders had decided in a village court that the two should get married and that her new husband had to give her a piece of land on condition that she should not leave him. But when she left him after six months, she refused to return the land. *Sontrasi* from a neighbouring village, with whom she had connections, came to the village every night for 15 days to show their force and several rich peasants fled from the village. Only after one villager with marital connections to one of the *sontrasi* went to talk to his father did they stop coming and did everything return to normal. Later, the middle peasant got his land back through a court case.

In another case, Samira, a landless woman, filed a complaint at the police station against one of the *mondols*. He had beaten her heavily with a leather belt because her ducks had been swimming in his pond. This *mondol* was notorious for beating up women and Samira had to spend several days in the hospital. One of the respected rich peasants mediated between both parties and it was agreed that Samira would withdraw her complaint on the condition that the culprit would have to pay 10,000 *Taka* to her if he would beat her again. After they had come to the agreement the mediator phoned the police station and the complaint was withdrawn. People told me that the *mondol* did not beat up any one after that.
8.5 Summary and Conclusion
What can we conclude from these rather diffuse findings about women’s land ownership and empowerment and observations on social change? At least it is clear that land ownership does not necessarily lead to empowerment.

Women have the right to inherit and own land, thus potentially choice is available. However, there are individual and structural factors that constrain women’s access to land. These structural factors are mainly related to the patriarchal gender ideology with its gender norms of women’s subservience and dependency, and an undervaluation of women’s participation in the production process. A woman’s class position, the position of her family in the village power structure, as well as the composition of the household, a woman’s knowledge, skills and character, her brothers’, husband’s and sons’ characters and her relationship with them also play a role.

In addition, women have been further pushed out of production by state and donor-driven programmes, and by losing part of their productive tasks, with them poor women have also lost an important source of income. At the same time, dowry has become an easy means to accumulate money for men from all classes and young women have become an even bigger burden for their parents. These developments have further limited women’s choice. Particularly poor women have no other choice left than to defy gender norms in order to survive.

An important reason why landownership often does not lead to a woman’s empowerment is that women do not have control over their land due to restrictive patriarchal norms and values. Nevertheless, we have also seen examples of women’s agency where, despite the constraints, women challenge their subordinate position and manage their land by themselves. Processes of economic and social transformation are taking place in Jhagrapur, but the changes are contradictory. On the one hand, facilitated by NGO and state programmes and policies, women are more organised and more recognised as a force in society. There is increased enrolment of girls in education which gives them more self-confidence and creates space to negotiate postponement of their marriages. State and donor-led family planning programmes have reduced the number of offspring and with that women’s childcare and household burden (but also, women’s bodies have suffered from the side-effects of sterilisations and contraceptives). On the other hand, the position of women has become worse due to increased dowry demands and violence against women (partly related to dowry), and decreased income opportunities for poor women in rural areas.

Women are more inclined to defy or modify gender norms of subservience and dependency than they were in 1974/75; they are more informed and talk back.

180 This is in sharp contrast to areas in and around the capital Dhaka where thousands of women work in the garments industry that has come up strongly since the 1990s and has become Bangladesh’s major export product.
Women also protest against being beaten up and defy their husband’s authority and the authority of village leaders. All these observations and experiences are indications of women’s empowerment and point to cracks in existing patriarchal gender relations. The question is: are these processes moving towards structural changes in gender and class inequalities, or are they merely modifications within existing power structures? Are class and patriarchal gender relations and ideologies, norms and values crumbling, or are they merely changing their appearance? A final assessment will be made in the next chapter.

In the next and final chapter, I will put all my findings together and give my overall analysis of the question whether women’s ownership of land contributes to women’s empowerment and whether it plays a role in challenging and changing gender and class inequalities. I will also reflect on the main issues that have been investigated and their theoretical and practical relevance.
9 Reflecting on women, land and power

What have we learned about the questions posed in chapter 1? Are the observations about women’s land ownership, empowerment and social change moving towards a structural transformation of gender and class inequalities, or are they merely modifications within existing power structures? For this final assessment, I will use Kabeer’s deconstruction of empowerment into three elements: resources (economic, human and social), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes of choice) discussed in chapter 2. Kabeer argues that the measurement of empowerment should consist of the measurement of all three. In other words, choice should be available, women should have the ability to make choices and, for these choices to contribute to structural transformation, they need to be strategic choices. That is: they should have the potential to transform the conditions under which these choices have been made. In the context of women’s land ownership, these would thus be choices that challenge the patriarchal gender norms and values that constrain women’s ownership and control over land. I will start with my research question on women’s relationship to land. Then I will look at the question of the impact of land ownership on women’s position in the household, the family and the community; does land ownership actually empower women? Thirdly, I will address the question whether women’s land ownership has the potential to contribute to processes of structural transformation towards a greater gender and class equality. Finally I will discuss some theoretical and practical considerations and I will end the chapter with a few conclusive remarks.

9.1 Women’s relationship to land

What is women’s relationship to land and has this changed over the last three decades? To what extent do women own and control land and what factors facilitate or constrain this? Are there any class differences in women’s relationship to land?

These questions on ownership and control over land correspond to Kabeer’s first element of empowerment: resources that provide the availability of choice. To assess the availability of choice, factors that constrain or facilitate women’s acquisition and control of land have been analysed. Women’s relationship to land in Bangladesh is complicated. My empirical findings indicate that more than one-third of the women in Jhagrapur owned land, mostly through inheritance, and that three-fourth of them are likely to inherit land in the course of their lives. Only 11 percent of the women in Jhagrapur owned purchased land and some wives received land in their names from their husbands who were concerned about their security after their deaths. A few other women purchased land themselves while their husbands were abroad. I did not find any women who had received khas land, although some women lived on khas land without having it in their possession. The major focus of my analysis has been on inherited land. The data gathered did not show any significant differences in women’s inheritance in 1975 and 2007 indicating that not more women have started claiming their inheritance share, as has been suggested by various scholars (Kabeer, Agarwal). The data gave some other important information as well: age and life cycle are important factors in
inheritance. Women usually get or take their inheritance share only after both their parents have died, thus mostly much later in life. Only one-third of the women of the 1975 sample had received their inheritance share by 1975, but by 2007 three-fourth of these same women had received their share. This shows that it is a myth that women usually renounce their share in favour of their brothers, as is reported in other studies. The majority of the women eventually did get their share. This finding bears implications for future studies on the position of women and for studies on land relations. Women’s inheritance and land ownership are important aspects of women’s position and of land relations and should not be ignored in studies on land relations or on gender issues. Gender aspects of ownership and control over land should be included in studies on land relations and gendered land relations should be included in studies on women and gender.

**Constraining factors**

My findings show that, apart from age and life cycle, virilocality combined with the distance between marriage village and parental village is a significant factor in women’s inheritance. Significantly more women who had been married within the village or a neighbouring village had received their inheritance share, than women who had been married further away from their parental village. The women married within the village or women from immediately surrounding areas married in Jhagrapur were mostly not married to blood relations. This indicates that the desire to keep a family’s ancestral land intact, as other scholars have argued, did not play a significant role in these cases. Given the significantly larger proportion of rich peasant women in this category, a possible explanation could be that a family makes strategic choices for their daughters’ marriage partners in order to extend its sphere of influence in the village. In these cases class considerations prevailed. With regard to women who originated from further-away villages, a family’s desire to keep ancestral land intact may have been a factor in daughters not getting their inheritance share. This needs further research.

Another factor that plays a role in women’s inheritance is the argument of several parents that their daughters were not given their land share, because they had paid dowry for their marriage. However, this argument does not hold as dowry is given to the bridegroom or his parents, and not to the bride. As dowry is forbidden by law, a better strategy that a few people have followed was to register a daughter’s inheritance share on her name at the time of her marriage instead of giving dowry. This way the daughter has a bigger chance to enjoy the fruits of her share.

In summary, the main obstacles for women’s inheritance were found in the marriage customs of virilocality, combined with village exogamy and the dowry system. These factors relate to the patriarchal gender ideology. Gender ideology is the main obstacle for the proper implementation of inheritance laws, except in the case of women married to someone in their own village; for the families of the latter class considerations prevail over gender considerations.
Facilitating factors
Obvious facilitating factors are women’s land rights and the availability of land. Land laws give women the choice to negotiate with parents, brothers, or authorities in the case of khas land, in order to obtain their rightful share. These laws create a necessary condition, but do not guarantee that women will actually get their share. Laws are hardly implemented and enforced leaving an important role to women’s agency in enforcing their claims. A woman’s knowledge, managerial skills and character can help her to add strength to her claim and her influence. In the case of inheritance, a woman can decide to emotionally appeal on her parents and/or brothers to give her due rights; their characters and a woman’s relationship with them play a role as well. In the case of khas land, women have the choice to take action individually or collectively to demand the land.
So, not only economic and socio-cultural factors can constrain or facilitate women’s acquisition of land, but also individual factors of a psychological/emotional nature that are related to a woman’s agency.

My findings did not indicate that purdah and education, as hypothesised by Agarwal, were significant factors in inheritance. The only exception was the case of non-educated poor peasant women. The latter had a greater chance to inherit land than poor peasant women who had received some education. I argued that this is related to the fact that the latter were perceived to have more chances on the job market and that dowry demands for their marriage were expected to be lower.

Class
There were no significant class differences in women’s inheritance, with the exception of landless peasant women and, as we have seen above, rich peasant women who were married within the village or immediately neighbouring villages. Among the poor peasant women, significantly fewer women from semi-proletarian peasant families had inherited land. The reason for this is simply that most of their parental families hardly own any land. Obviously, in the case of landless peasant families, class is always a constraining factor in inheritance, both for women and men, as there is no, or very little property to divide. The distribution of khas land to these families could have made up for this, but no such distribution has taken place in the village.

Control over land
I have argued that the question of control over land is crucial. Control over land means having the power to decide over its use and its produce. Applying Kabeer’s analysis of empowerment, control is a pre-condition for women to be empowered by land ownership; control over their land gives women a choice what to do with their land and its fruits and in whose interest. At the same time, control in itself is empowering because it is a process, it means using one’s skills, knowledge (human resources) and collectivity (social resources) to make choices and obtain desired results. This is the agency aspect and will be addressed in section 9.2.
My findings indicate that only few women had control over their own land and its produce. Most of women’s land was controlled by their brothers, their husband or their sons. Only widows or divorced women who owned land and women whose husbands were abroad and without adult sons staying with them managed the cultivation of their land themselves. Being the head of the household gave women space to have an important say in major decisions and act on their own. Forced by circumstances, they had a chance to take on the male gender role of taking care of all productive tasks because there was no one else to do that and, apparently, purdah considerations did not prevent them from doing this. Thus, marital status and male migration are factors that can either facilitate or constrain women’s control over land; widows, divorced women and other female heads of households are in a better position to have control over their land. The other side of the coin was that the latter women encountered other difficulties such as insults and insinuations from their in-laws and others who could not tolerate that these women dared to act independently. Single women were also more vulnerable to land grabbing in case they did not have the protection of other relatives or of a high family status, but with the decline of the traditional village power structure rich vultures could not play tricks as easily anymore.

The major constraining factor in women’s control over land (and subsequently their empowerment) is the patriarchal gender ideology that men are seen as the producers and women as the dependents. As a result, there is a rather strict gender division of labour; women do not work on the land and their role in the production process is not recognised. The norm that women are dependent on their father, husbands, or sons for their maintenance has taken away their control over land. Women often have no choice than to leave the cultivation of their land to their husband, sons or brothers. In the literature this is usually connected to the Islamic prescription of purdah. However, although purdah is part of the patriarchal ideology, it has not been a constraining factor in the increased mobility and visibility of women in public spaces; it was observed that women modified the appearance and practice of purdah (not their adherence to it). Thus, not purdah, but the patriarchal ideology that does not recognise women’s role in the production process and makes them dependent on men for their livelihood is the explanation why women do not work on the land and have no control over their land. This has practical implications. If a woman gets land, her control over it should be secured, not only by registration in her name, but also by acknowledging her role in the production process next to her reproductive role and she should be provided with the necessary skills and facilities.

The practice that inherited land is often not registered in the name of the lawful heirs for a long time after the death of the parents is another obstacle for women’s control over their land. This makes it easier for a woman’s brothers to control her share and to deny her access to the land documents that are kept in their control. However, even if a woman’s inherited land share is registered on her name, she does not necessarily have control over her land; women are sometimes cheated
by their brothers, husbands or sons. Thus, a woman’s relationship with them and 
their characters are individual factors that can either be constraining or facilitating. 
If the relationships are good, a woman may have some influence on the decision-
making regarding her land; but if they are bad, she is likely to lose out. A woman’s 
own skills and knowledge can facilitate control as well.

Marital status and male migration were more important than class with regard 
to control over land. Class only made a difference for women who belonged to 
powerful influential families as their status protected these women against land 
grabbers.

9.2 Women’s land ownership and empowerment
What impact does women’s land ownership have on women’s agency/empower-
ment? Do women who own land have more power in the various arenas than 
women who do not own land?

This question corresponds to Kabeer’s second element of empowerment: agency. 
Agency relates to the choices that women make to obtain valued results. This 
study has shown that the relation between women’s land ownership and em-
powerment is more complex than Agarwal has suggested. Using decision-making 
(making choices) as a measurement of a woman’s empowerment, my findings 
did not indicate a clear difference between women who have land and women 
who do not. Some women did have decision-making power in major issues, but 
this was not clearly linked to land ownership. It related more to other factors, 
such as their family status, their managerial skills and knowledge, their strong 
character and the character of and relationship with their husbands. Male (threat 
of) violence was not studied systematically and no clear conclusions can be drawn 
about the relation between (absence of) violence, land ownership and empower-
ment. Women who owned land, as well as women who did not, faced (threats of) 
violence. Violence, or the threat of violence, was mostly used by men to assert 
their masculinity and authority and to enforce patriarchal norms.

More insight has been gained in the conditions under which land ownership em-
powers women and the factors that play a role. First of all, my findings indicate 
that women’s control over their land is a crucial factor in the relation between land 
ownership and empowerment. Control indicates agency and can actually be taken 
as a measurement of women’s empowerment. A woman may have land, but if she 
cannot take control over it and decide how to utilise it and its produce she still has 
no choice. Both ownership and control are preconditions for empowerment and the 
lack of control over land by women in the village explains the absence of a clear re-
lation between land ownership and empowerment. Women’s control over land 
is seriously constrained by the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology and its gender 
division of labour that confines women’s productive role to her homestead. As a 
result women’s productive role is often not recognised and seriously undervalued.
Other factors that play a role in the relation between land ownership and empowerment are a woman’s class background, her family’s position in the village power structure and her personality, intelligence, knowledge and skills. These factors can be either facilitating or constraining as well. The various arenas of interaction - marital relation, the household, the natal family and the community - need to be taken into account as well as they represent different dimensions of gendered power relations and the position of women in each arena is different. In one arena a woman may have more power and space to decide or to negotiate than in another because the gender dynamics are different. Thus in future studies on women and land, women’s position in the various arenas need to be studied as. Furthermore, the household composition is important. Nuclear household situations proved more favourable for the empowerment of young married women than joint households, whereas their mothers-in-law lose part of their control when their sons and daughters-in-law move out of the joint household. A daughter-in-law has less power in a joint family where she also has to deal with the authority of her in-laws than in a nuclear household where she only needs to deal with her husband. In the latter she will be in a better position to influence decision-making. Widows, divorced women and women whose husbands are abroad have some advantage; they have no husbands to control them and this gives them more freedom to take control over their own lives and go against prevailing gender and class norms.

On a somewhat different note, my observation that a lot of remittances of migrant workers abroad were invested in land purchase and house construction means that more women whose husbands are abroad may enter the land market in the future. This in turn would affect gender dynamics in the male-dominated land market. Thus, women’s relation to purchased land is an issue that may become more important in the village in the future (it may already be in areas where many men have migrated abroad) and is certainly an issue that needs to be included in future studies on land relations next to inheritance. The above, however, should certainly not be taken as a plea for market-led ‘land reform’ which either largely excludes poor peasant men and women, or leads to them becoming highly indebted.

9.3 Women, land and structural transformation

Does land ownership give women power to challenge or change unequal gender and class relations and in this way contributes to a structural transformation of existing power structures? Are there any class differences in women’s contributions to such processes of social transformation?

To assess the contribution of women’s empowerment to transformation processes, Kabeer has suggested that not only the availability of choice and the process (agency) but also the consequences of choice, the outcome, should be included in the measurement of empowerment. Women’s agency does not necessarily contribute to structural changes; it can also assert existing gender norms and values, or it can change power relations in a woman’s own individual circumstances.
without having an impact on the larger structure. For choices to contribute to structural transformation they need to be strategic choices; that is choices that have the potential to transform the conditions under which they have been made, or, in other words, choices that have the potential to transform the constraining structural factors. This process of transformation is in turn empowering. Applied to the issue of women’s land ownership, strategic choices would be choices that challenge or change factors that constrain equal land rights and women’s control over land. Importantly, this implies that in order to make such strategic choices women will have to be prepared to (openly or in a covert way) challenge these factors. As we have seen, the major constraints for women to claim land and take control over it lie in the existing patriarchal class structure with its gender ideology of women’s dependency and the non-recognition of their productive role. Thus a truly structural change can take place only if women opt for strategic choices that challenge their (economic) dependency on men by claiming their land rights, their place in the production process and by extending their productive role through taking control of their land and its produce. This involves taking risks; women who challenge existing power structures risk insults, stigmatisation and violence. Contributing to structural changes not only means making choices, it also means taking risks to overcome constraints and as such taking risk is part of the empowerment process. Yet, the risk aspect of empowerment is missing in Kabeer’s argument. The question to what extent women are prepared to take risks is an important aspect of opting for strategic choices. The bigger the (perceived) risk and the more is at stake, the less prepared women will be to take it. How big a risk is depends on economic and socio-cultural circumstances, but also on individual circumstances such as personal social relations and personalities of the people involved. We have seen the examples of women who manage their land by themselves; with their strong personality and intelligence they take the risk to ignore prevailing gender and class norms and step outside existing structures to take on the role of producer and provider. The same goes for landless widows and divorced women who have no adult male to provide and protect them and to take care of the household income and to an extent for women from landless households as well as. These women often have no other choice and are therefore prepared to take more risk and face the consequences as their survival and the survival of their children is at stake. Thus, in such economic and/or social circumstances, these women are prepared to take risks and defy gender norms; they create their own space to act outside the structural constraints of existing gender and class relations and they become agents of change in processes of structural transformation.

The question then is what changes have taken place in Jhagrapur and are these structural changes in gender and class relations? Or have subjugating class and gender structures and ideologies just changed their appearance?

Processes of economic and social transformation are taking place in Jhagrapur, but the changes are contradictory. On the one hand, the position of women has
improved. Facilitated by NGO and state programmes and policies, women are more organised and visible in public spaces; their mobility and potential for agency has increased. There is also increased participation of girls in higher education which has given them more self-confidence and created space, for instance, to negotiate postponement of their marriage. Due to state and donor-led family planning programmes, women have reduced the number of offspring and, with that, their childcare and household burden. Women have gained more control over their reproductive capacity, but the responsibility for birth control has been put almost entirely on women with their bodies sometimes suffering from side-effects. Women who challenged their subordinate position and defied gender norms of subservience and dependency have played an important role in these changes. On the other hand, women have been further pushed out of production by state and donor-driven programmes resulting in a loss of value, a loss of means of income for poor women, an even greater dependency on men and a greater class differentiation, also between women. Steadily increasing dowry demands have made daughters an even bigger burden for their parents, while for parents with sons dowry has become a means to accumulate money. A few women managed to use dowry to exert their agency and negotiate the way in which dowry was invested.

The invention of microfinance has been another major change, but landless women are excluded from these programmes and the system does not address the structural causes of poverty, which lie in the unequal distribution of productive resources and power. The changes in the position of women in the village are a reflection of the changes in the larger society. Women are more recognised as a force in society, there are laws that protect women and in urban areas women have become an important part of the labour force, however, in rural areas there are hardly employment opportunities for women.

Class and gender oppression and exploitation are less blatant than before. Culturally and socially, women, in particular poor peasant women, have stretched the boundaries of norms and values. However, the changes have stayed largely within the parameters of existing power relations in patriarchal class society. They are modifications of existing class and gender relations, and the structures of subordination and exploitation of women and of the poor classes have not been uprooted. The unequal distribution of productive resources, exploitative labour relations and the patriarchal ideology that denies or undervalues women’s productive and reproductive labour still continues. Hierarchies have not disappeared and the established powers are still in command, even if some of these are being challenged. In the meantime, global male dominated neo-liberal forces have gained a stronger hold on the country than before and have added a new dimension.

9.4 Perspectives for the future
My findings have further theoretical and practical implications; these are discussed below.
Theoretical implications

This study has shown that more specific research on women’s relationship to land and its contribution to structural transformation of gender and class relations is needed. First of all, the argument that land rights and land ownership empowers women needs to be much more refined. Future studies on (the impact of) women’s land ownership and on empowerment should include an examination of the specific context of women’s circumstances, particularly with regard to gender and class relations. This should also include structural political, socio-economic and cultural conditions and factors that constrain or enable women’s land ownership, control and empowerment in the various arenas of interaction, while taking class differences between women into account as well. Empowerment should be conceptualised as a process of self-development of intrinsic power to collectively transform oppressive structures both in production and reproduction relations. Bringing these elements together will shed a different light on the dynamics involved in land relations.

Although I have used women’s decision-making power as an indicator of empowerment, in retrospect I question the usefulness of this indicator. Decision-making power of individual women in the household, the family and society says nothing about the structural transformational aspect of intrinsic empowerment - the processes of transformation of structural inequalities and injustices. Decision-making can only have a transformational potential if women on a large scale start tacitly ignoring or actively opposing the structural constraints imposed by the dominant gender and class ideologies that restrict women’s power and choices and if this becomes a collective process that spreads beyond individual boundaries. Besides, decisions taken need to go beyond the parameters of existing unequal gender and class relations and other structural injustices. Kabeer has stressed the importance of the transformatory aspect of empowerment of women for gender equality. However, by taking decision-making as a measurement of empowerment she leaves space for an interpretation of the transformatory potential as a transformation in the lives of individual women, rather than a structural transformation of power relations. Decision-making in itself does not necessarily include an element of structural transformation and is therefore not a useful measurement of empowerment as conceptualised in this study. It would be more useful to study which factors involved in gender and class relations directly or indirectly constrain processes of self-empowerment and how women find ways to go around these constraints.

This study has identified factors related to the prevailing gender ideology that constrain women’s control over land and a process of intrinsic self-empowerment. The patriarchal ideology of women’s dependency and a lack of recognition of woman’s role in the production process is deeply rooted and programmed in the mindset of people, also of scholars and development workers. This is an important reason why such factors are often not recognised and not included in research or development work, adding to the marginalisation of women in agriculture. To some extent,
the first Jhagrapur study also suffered from this limitation. Where I recognised the heavy reproductive and productive tasks of women, I undervalued their productive work as only supplementary to the main income provided by men and also did not recognise the importance of women’s land ownership as part of their contribution. Such deeply rooted biases need conscious de-programming and creative thinking to develop alternatives.

Practical implications
My findings that land is not always a source of power for women in their social relations should not be taken as an argument against women’s right to land. On the contrary, it is an argument for women’s control over land, including taking or getting the means to control, not just in individual cases, but structurally. This requires an abolishment of gender and class ideologies that are based on inequality and marginalisation or exclusion of specific groups. It also requires laws and regulations that are systematically implemented at the grassroots. Land is the most important means of livelihood security and when asked, most women said that they would like most of all to have land in their name as it would make them feel more secure. Livelihood security is most crucial for women, as it entails their survival. Men have also acknowledged this and several men have given land in their wife’s name ‘for when I am gone’. If a woman has control over land she is less vulnerable to destitution in case her marriage breaks down or her husband dies. She may also be less inclined to choose for options in her social relations that strengthen subjugating gender norms. Provided that they have control, land ownership certainly empowers women and strengthens their position. Given the fact that there are worldwide reports of feminisation of poverty, of women and children being hit hardest by globalisation, providing women with productive resources, in particular land, is extremely important. Sustained campaigns led by poor peasant women and supported by others to demand women’s equal rights to resources and their control over these will undoubtedly alter gender relations fundamentally and contribute to a structural change in women’s position. Such campaigns explicitly acknowledge women’s equal role in production and need to be supported and strengthened.

Women’s collective action is essential, not only in strengthening the demand to their rights, but also in managing their acquired land. The risk factor involved in making choices that contribute to structural transformation provides another strong argument for collective action by women. For instance, if women take up control over their land together by managing the cultivation collectively or by leasing land collectively, they do not need to deal with labourers and inputs individually and will be less vulnerable to insults or repressive actions by reactionary forces. They will stand stronger. Working collectively will have a threefold effect: it will minimise the risk, the collective process will give women more strength and will empower them and, thirdly, working collectively is a process of transformation of social relations in itself. The case of male labourers working collectively on contract to harvest and thresh paddy has shown that collectively they stand stronger. Through
collectively operating their threshing machine and working longer hours they have been able to make better deals with landowners and earn more than daily wage labourers. Their bargaining power has increased and besides, they have become less dependent on the working conditions largely set by the landowners. Their collectivity has had an impact on labour relations. Similarly, widows and divorced women could collectively manage their acquired land and married women could negotiate their collective involvement in production with their husbands.

Apart from collectively managing the cultivation of their own or leased land, women could find other productive resources to manage or operate collectively, such as, for instance, fish ponds for fish cultivation, shallow tube wells for irrigation, bullocks and bullock carts to rent out (women are already responsible for taking care of animals), or collectively buying paddy to process for rice trade. Forced by circumstances, or by their own choice, women could take control over resources or take on other work outside their homesteads. Their increased incomes would contribute to their households and to the economy. Over time this would then lead to a greater acceptance of women’s role in production, not only by people at the grassroots, but also by scholars, government officials, development workers and so on. This development will also require a more equally shared burden of the care of the household and the family which will in turn empower all those involved and affect all spheres of life at the various levels. It will also liberate men from the burden of having to live up to patriarchal norms of male dominant behaviour and superiority. Such ideas would be particularly interesting for poor peasant women; they are in a good position to take the lead in this as they have already shown that they are prepared to take more risk and are agents of change. They are in a better position to convince their husbands of the advantages and gains of such enterprises as their husbands would also benefit from an increase in the meagre household income. Besides, poor peasants do not have to uphold their status; they can ignore conventional social norms because they have no choice within the given parameters and they have nothing to lose.

Such processes would certainly contribute to a change in people’s mindset and a transformation of gender and class relations, but this will not be enough. There will also have to be a change in policies and institutions that structurally anchor these new visions at all levels will have to be built. Ideas regarding the distribution of resources and women’s role in production, but also regarding the nature of agricultural production itself will have to change. If we want food security and eradication of poverty, then the latter is essential as well to get a sustainable economy that protects the environment and people’s health. Only if peasant men and women start to make a choice for sustainable organic farming, based on both their traditional knowledge systems and combined with new insights will this lead to a structural transformation. At the same time, such a choice will break the present trends towards increasing corporate control over food production and agriculture in general which poisons the earth and people’s health with fertilisers, pesticides and genetically manipulated crops. This transformation will also stop the proletarianisation of
the peasantry and the conversion of agriculture from producing essential foods into producing commodities for the world’s rich and corporate profits. Alternative forms of agriculture and of land management will be truly innovative and transformatory. The present emphasis of the Bangladesh government on poverty reduction strategies in tune with international donor governments and institutions leaves no room for such options as they mostly depend on neo-liberal market-led forces. Practical experiences from organisations such as La Via Campesina, an international movement of landless, small and medium-size peasant men and women, and the Food Information and Action Network (FIAN) would be a source of inspiration. They have successfully led struggles for fair economic relations, sustainable agricultural production by small and middle peasant men and women, and the preservation of natural resources and food sovereignty.

9.5 In Conclusion
As has become clear by now, the issues are complex and involve multiple factors. Bangladesh is clearly a society in transition and in Jhagrapur some trends towards greater gender and class equality have become visible. Class and gender oppression and exploitation are less blatant than before and culturally and socially the class and gender balance is shifting. Although women and poor peasants have stretched the boundaries of norms and values, they still largely remain within the parameters of existing power relations of class and gender. The changes are modifications of existing class and gender relations, rather than that these structures of subordination and exploitation of women and of the poor classes have been uprooted. The roots for this lie in the profit-maximising capitalist patriarchal structures based on inequality and arrogance of the rich and powerful, and, inherent to this, the unequal distribution of productive resources, exploitative labour relations and unequal gender relations in which women’s productive and reproductive labour is denied or undervalued. Hierarchies have not disappeared and the established powers are still in command. Moreover, global male dominated neo-liberal forces have gained more control on the country than before.

Finally, to change structurally unequal relations and injustices implies the transformation of centuries-old ideologies and institutionalised practices. For such a transformation, a dialectical process of women’s and men’s collective and cooperative agency, fundamental changes in people’s mindset from hierarchical thinking to an all-inclusive egalitarian, non-exploitative thinking and concerted efforts to put these changed mindsets into practice collectively are required. If this comes about, it will eventually lead to changes in economic and socio-cultural spheres of life at all levels – local, national and global that reflect this new thinking. Importantly, marginalised and excluded women and men at the grassroots cannot afford to wait until the state, NGOs or other institutions will come forward to enforce their equal rights. Their leadership, with the support of others, will ultimately lead to enforcement of their due rights and safeguard the gains they have made. This is a long and complicated process that takes the sustained efforts of at least several generations, more than the time span of 35 years that this study has bridged.
Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagrapur revisited


Ahmad, Mohiuddin (undated, probably 1990), Land To The Landless: A Reference Book on Khas land Allocation in Bangladesh. Bangkok: ACFOD.


Barkat, Abul, S Zaman and S Raihan (2001), Political Economy of Khas Land in Bangladesh. 2001, Dhaka: ALRD.


Breman, Jan, Peter Kloos, and Ashwani Saith (eds.), (1997), The Village In Asia Revisited, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.


DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) (1985), Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives. Delhi: DAWN.


Gouthami and Rajgor, Meena (2008), ‘Women’s Perceptions Of Land Ownership: a case study from Kutch District, Gujarat, India’, *Gender & Development* 16:1, 41-54. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552070701876144.


Kloos, Peter (1997), 'Restudies in Anthropology: Modalities, Limitations and Alternatives.' In Breman, Jan, Peter Kloos, and Ashwani Saith (eds.), The Village In Asia Revisited, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.


UBINIG (1988), Norplant: The Five Year Needle. Dhaka, Bangladesh: UBINIG.


Women for Women (ed.), (1979), *The Situation of Women in Bangladesh*. Dhaka

Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagrapur revisited
This study is about the relationship between women, land, empowerment and social transformation. Since long, feminist activists and scholars have pointed out that the subordinate position of women and their low social status are related to the fact that they are largely excluded from the means of production. Therefore, they have been demanding equal rights for women to land and other means of production. Bina Agarwal (1994) has argued that land ownership empowers women to challenge and change structural inequalities. This study explores Agarwal’s argument. What is women’s relationship to land? Do women who own land have more power in their social relations and control over their own lives than women who do not, and does land empower them to play a role in a structural social transformation of gender and class relations? Theories and debates on women’s land rights, structure-agency and women’s agency/empowerment have been used to examine these questions as well as factors that enable or constrain women’s land ownership and empowerment and class differences in these. I have examined these questions through participant observation and informal talks and interviews during different periods of fieldwork in Jhagrapur (pseudonym), a village in western Bangladesh between 1975 and 2009. In the concept of empowerment I have emphasised the aspect of structural transformation which has been lost in a lot of the development literature and practice, while it is the essence of empowerment if we are concerned with structural social change. For the assessment of empowerment, I have drawn largely on Kabeer’s analysis of empowerment (Kabeer 1999).

My aim is to contribute to theories and debates on processes of structural transformation of Bangladesh society, in particular with regard to unequal gender and class relations, and their applications in practice. My main social motivation to take up this study lies in the subjugated and extremely precarious situation of poor peasant women (and men), in Bangladesh. With this study, I hope to contribute to an insight on how land ownership could mean significant structural improvement in their lives.

Bangladesh society is a country in transition, both economically and socially. In 1974/75 when I first lived in Jhagrapur to do a study on power relations, the bloody 1971 war of independence against Pakistani domination was still fresh in the minds of the people and the land was economically in shatters. Western donor governments and international financing institutions pumped billions of dollars into the country and for a long time Bangladesh was one of the top priority countries for ‘development aid’. When I started the present study in 1998, the export of garments and remittances of Bangladeshi migrant labourers abroad had become the major source of foreign income and neo-liberal forces and transnational corporations had penetrated rural areas. Many households now have a television and use commercial product likes toothpaste, lipstick and mobile phones. Infrastructure has improved and the influence of the media and the ‘free market’ are clearly noticeable. People are much more aware and knowledgeable of the world outside the village. An important change in rural areas of Bangladesh has been the introduction of the Green Revolution which has had tremendous economic as well as social consequences.
that are also clearly noticeable in Jhagrapur. With the Green Revolution, new agrarian technology was introduced that allowed paddy to be cultivated two to three times a year instead of once or twice and paddy yields more than doubled. At the same time, fertiliser and pesticides became compulsory and the special HYV (High Yielding Variety) seeds, produced by transnational companies, had to be bought (instead of preserved). As a result, the cost of paddy cultivation increased and peasants had to take loans to finance the cultivation of their land. Many poor peasants became highly indebted gradually losing their land and becoming dependent on daily wage labour. In Jhagrapur, the percentage of poor peasant households increased from 54 percent in 1975 to 65 percent in 1999 and where in 1975 the richest 20 percent of the households owned 60 percent of the land in 1999 this had increased to 72 percent. With an extra cycle of paddy cultivation there was more work for agricultural labourers and in Jhagrapur even a shortage of labourers arose in the peak seasons which resulted in daily wages also increasing. But women in Bangladesh mostly do not work on the land and with the agricultural transformation women lost part of their productive post-harvest work. For poor peasant women this meant a loss of their most important source of income - boiling and husking paddy and grinding wheat. To process the increased paddy yields rice mills were introduced and they took over the women’s work. Especially for landless widows and divorced women survival became very difficult, especially if they did not have any grown up sons who could work as day labourer. As they often said, a small plot of land would have made a lot of difference for their livelihood security and survival. Land in Bangladesh is the most important means of production, but the major part of the land is owned by men. Realising the importance of land for the survival of their wives, a few men in the village have given their wives a plot of land registered in their name “for when I’m gone”.

The economic transformation that started with the Green Revolution had consequences for social relations and norms and values as well. An important change in marriage customs was that in all classes bridegrooms and their parents started demanding high sums of money as dowry from the family of the bride. This practice led to a further impoverishment of poor families with daughters and an increase in violence against women. On the other hand, for families with sons it became an easy way to acquire a large sum of money.

Other relevant developments since 1975 are the increased participation of girls in education, the use of contraceptives (mostly by women) to reduce the number of children, the introduction of NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations), microfinance, and the increased mobility and visibility of women in public spaces. In reaction to this there was a growing influence of political Islam, but this did not get much support in Jhagrapur.

Eighty-five percent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, about ten percent is Hindu and the rest is Buddhist, Christian or Animist. Because there is only one Hindu family in Jhagrapur this study deals only with Muslim women. Muslim
women in Bangladesh have the right to inherit and to own land. They inherit a
one-third share while their brothers inherit two-thirds of their parents’ property.
Women’s organisations have demanded equal inheritance for women since long
and even though the government has pledged to introduce equal rights for women,
conservative Islamic forces have so far successfully resisted this. Landless women
also have the right to khas land (fallow government land), but none of the landless
women in Jhagrapur have received any of this land. Women obtain land mostly
through inheritance. Only a few women possess purchased land; in 2007 this was
only 11 percent of the women.

Both in 1975 as in 2007 about one-third of the women surveyed owned inherited
land. Of the women I had asked about their land inheritance in 1974/75 as many
as three-fourth had received their inheritance share by 2007. This means that age
and life cycle play a role in inheritance as women usually take or get their share
only after both parents have died. I did not find any significant class differences
between women with regard to inheritance. But there are class differences as well
as differences in marital status with regard to women’s control over the land that
they own. Widows, divorced women and women whose husband works abroad
managed the cultivation of their land by themselves and decided how to utilise its
produce. The facts that women in Bangladesh generally do not work on the land
and that their role in the production process is not acknowledged or undervalued are
other factors that constrain women’s control over land. Besides, due to expensive
and complicated registration procedures, land is often not registered in the name
of the rightful heir until years after the death of the parents. This is advantageous
for women’s brothers who have the land in their control; they often play tricks to
deceive their sisters and appropriate their shares.

The relation between land ownership and empowerment of women is complicated
and far from one-dimensional. Taking decision-making as an indicator of empow-
erment, I did not find any clear difference between women who own land and
women who do not. Women do take their own decisions regarding daily household
affairs, but regardless of whether they own land or not, most women do not have
a voice in final decisions over major issues like the sale or mortgage of land or
the choice of bridegroom for a daughter. Some women did have a major say in
important decisions, but this was not related to land ownership, but rather due to
the status of their parents, their intelligence, their managerial skills and knowledge,
their strong personality and the kind of relationship they had with their husbands.

My findings indicate that control over land and its produce rather than ownership as
such is a necessary condition for empowerment. Only few women are in control
of their own land; in most cases brothers and in some cases husbands or sons are
in control of a woman’s land. The patriarchal ideology of women’s subordination to
and economic dependence on men - first her father, then her husband and finally
her sons - is the most important obstacle for women to have control over their
own land. This ideology is deeply rooted in people’s minds, not only of people at
the grassroots but also of scientists, development workers and policymakers. That is the reason why these factors are often not recognised which has contributed to the further marginalisation of women in agriculture.

My findings also indicate that power relations vary within the various social arenas - marriage, household, kinship or community. In one arena a woman may have more power than in another and her choices may differ depending on where she finds herself. Therefore, it is important to study not only the relation between land ownership and empowerment within the household, but also within other social relations. The composition of the household plays a role as well. A young woman in a joint family with her in-laws not only has to face the authority of her husband but also of her in-laws.

I did not study violence against women systematically, but from the incidents of violence that I witnessed and heard of I did not get the impression that there is a clear difference in (the threat of), violence against women with or without land. Violence against women occurs in all classes and is mostly used by men to assert their authority and enforce gendered moral values like submissiveness of women. Women often conform to patriarchal norms and values to avoid the (threat of), violence. But there are women who protest against violence, openly or in an indirect way and individually or collectively.

I also did not find a clear relation between women’s land ownership and choices they make to challenge unequal gender or class relations and oppressive norms and values. To make choices that challenge social constraints to obtain land and the control over it also means taking risks. In particular widows and divorced women without adult sons were prepared to take such risks; without an adult male in their household to control them, they have more space to manoeuvre outside existing power relations and act in their own interest. Also, landless women are more prepared to defy oppressive gender norms and power relations as their main interest is their survival and the survival of their household members; they have much less to lose. These women are first of all pioneers of change.

Finally, we arrive at the question whether processes of transformation that have taken place point towards structural changes or whether they merely change the appearance of existing unequal gender and class relations. On the one hand, the changes that have taken place have given women more space. Women are more organised and visible in public spaces and their subjugated position is more acknowledged. Women have more freedom of choice with regard to childbirth and more girls take part in secondary and higher education. On the other hand, women in rural Bangladesh have been pushed further out of the production process and poor peasant women have lost their most important sources of income, without getting alternative employment possibilities. These developments have increased class differences between women. Moreover, the penetration of dowry demands in all classes of society and the exponential rise of the amount of the demands has
led to a further impoverishment of poor peasant households with more daughters. The rise of microfinance programmes targeting women is unable to reverse this impoverishment because landless women without adult male members in their households are denied microfinance loans. Besides, microfinance has further indebted poor households and even contributed to the rise of dowry demands.

On the whole, there is less blatant starvation and women have stretched the boundaries of oppressive norms and values, but the changes have not uprooted existing inequalities and subjugating hierarchies.

From the results of this study suggestions for further research can be formulated. Because land ownership and, more particularly, control over land is important for women’s livelihood security and for their position, the issue of women’s land rights needs to feature in studies on land relations and in studies on class and gender relations. It needs to be emphasised that the finding that land ownership does not always directly leads to empowerment in their social relations, should not be used as an argument against women’s right to land. On the contrary, it is an argument for women’s control over their property, not only in individual cases, but in a structural way, for all women, laid down in laws and regulations that are truly implemented. Only then will land ownership empower women and give them livelihood security. This means not only registration of land in women’s names, but also full recognition of their role in the production process, next to their reproductive roles. Women’s control over land also requires that they are given the necessary skills and facilities. Collective management of their land as a possibility for more effective control also needs to be further examined. Collective action may structurally strengthen women’s position and reduce the risks involved. The possibilities of collective management of other means of production, such as irrigation pumps, fish ponds, oxen and buffalo carts or collectively buying, processing and selling of paddy can be looked into as well. Poor peasant women could take the lead in this. It should also be realised that the issue is not just a redistribution of the means of production, but that a solution should also include a different mode of production that is ecologically sustainable and improves rather than deteriorates people’s health.

In conclusion, to change structurally unequal relations and injustices implies the transformation of centuries-old ideologies and institutionalised practices. This requires a dialectical process of women’s and men’s collective and cooperative agency, fundamental changes in people’s mindset from hierarchical thinking to an all-inclusive egalitarian, non-exploitative thinking and concerted efforts to put these changed mindsets into practice collectively. If this comes about, it will eventually lead to changes in economic and socio-cultural spheres of life at all levels – local, national and global that reflect this new thinking. Importantly, marginalised and excluded women and men at the grassroots cannot afford to wait until the state, NGOs or other institutions will come forward to enforce their equal rights. Their leadership, with the support of others, will ultimately lead to enforcement of their due rights and safeguard the gains they have made. This is a long and complicated
process that takes the sustained efforts of at least several generations, more than the time span of 35 years that this study has bridged.


Mijn doel is om met dit onderzoek een bijdrage te leveren aan theorie en praktijk met betrekking tot landbezit en ‘empowerment’ van vrouwen en een structurele verandering van de positie van arme plattelandsvrouwen en hun gezinnen, zodat hun ondergeschikte rol verdwijnt en zij controle over hun eigen leven krijgen.

Bangladesh is een land in beweging, zowel economisch als sociaal. In 1974/75 was de bloedige onafhankelijkheidsoorlog tegen Pakistan nog maar drie jaar geleden en het land was er economisch slecht aan toe. Westerse donoren hebben miljarden in het land gepompt en lange tijd was Bangladesh een van de landen met de hoogste prioriteit voor ‘ontwikkelingshulp’. Tegenwoordig zijn de export van kleding en de salarissen van migranten in het buitenland (‘remittances’), de grootste bronnen van buitenlandse inkomsten en is de neoliberale globalisering en de macht van transnationale bedrijven in het platteland doorgedrongen. Er is een verbeterde infrastructuur en de invloed van de media en de ‘vrije markt’ is duidelijk merkbaar. Ook veel arme huishoudens hebben inmiddels een televisie en commerciële invloeden zijn te merken aan de aanwezigheid van producten als zeep, tandpasta, lippenstift, mobiele telefoons en motorfietsen. Een belangrijke verandering op het platteland is de invoering van de Groene Revolutie. Met de Groene Revolutie werd van nieuwe agrarische technologie geïntroduceerd die een hogere opbrengst mogelijk maakte, maar tegelijkertijd het gebruik van kunstmest

De economische veranderingen, die met de Groene Revolutie begonnen, hadden ook gevolgen voor de sociale verhoudingen en normen en waarden. Zo werd het steeds gebruikelijker om bij het huwelijk van een dochter een bruidsschat te geven aan de bruidegom of zijn familie, vaak in de vorm van geld. Dit heeft geleid tot verdere verarming van families met dochters en een toename van geweld tegen vrouwen. Voor families met zonen werd het daarentegen een makkelijke manier om geld te bemachtigen. Andere relevante ontwikkelingen sinds 1975 zijn de grotere deelname van meisjes aan het onderwijs, het gebruik van voorbehoedmiddelen (meestal door vrouwen), en daarmee geboortebeperking en spreiding van kinderen, de opkomst van NGO’s (Niet Gouvernementele Organisaties), microfinanciering en de toegenomen zichtbaarheid van vrouwen in de openbare ruimte. De groeiende invloed van de politieke Islam was een antwoord hierop, maar deze heeft in Jhagrapur niet veel voeten aan de grond gekregen.

Vijftig procent van de bevolking van Bangladesh is Islamitisch. Omdat er in Jhagrapur maar één Hindoefamilie woont gaat dit onderzoek over Moslimvrouwen. Vrouwen in Bangladesh hebben erfrecht en mogen grond bezitten. Arme vrouwen hebben bovendien recht op khas grond (braakliggende grond van de staat), maar dit blijkt een loze belofte van de regering; geen van de arme huishoudens in Jhagrapur heeft khas grond gekregen. Vrouwen krijgen voornamelijk via erfrecht grond in hun bezit. Weinig vrouwen bezitten aangekochte grond; in 2007 was dit maar 11 procent van de vrouwen. Moslimvrouwen hebben recht op het erven van een derde deel van de grond van hun ouders, hun broers hebben recht op twee derde deel. Vrouwenorganisaties eisen gelijk erfrecht voor vrouwen en mannen, maar conservatieve Islamitische krachten verzetten zich hiertegen.
Zowel in 1974/75 als in 2007 had ongeveer een derde van de ondervraagde vrouwen grond geërfd. Van de vrouwen die ik in 1974/75 gevraagd had of ze land hadden geërfd had inmiddels maar liefst driekwart grond geërfd. Dit betekent dat leeftijdse factor een belangrijke rol speelt bij het erven van land van de ouders. Vrouwen krijgen of nemen hun erfdeel meestal pas nadat beide ouders zijn overleden. Met betrekking tot het krijgen of opeisen van hun erfdeel heb ik geen significante klassenverschillen tussen vrouwen gevonden. Wel spelen klassenverschillen en verschillen in huwelijkspositie een rol bij de controle van vrouwen over hun grond. Weduwen, gescheiden vrouwen, alsook vrouwen wier echtgenoot in het buitenland werkte, regelden vaker zelf de bebouwing van hun grond en beslisten wat ze met de opbrengst deden. Een andere factor die van invloed is op de controle die vrouwen op hun eigen grond hebben, is het feit dat vrouwen in Bangladesh niet op het land werken en dat hun bijdrage aan het productieproces niet wordt erkend. Bovendien, vanwege gecompliceerde en dure registratieprocedures wordt land vaak tot jaren na de dood van de ouders niet op naam van de erfgenamen geregistreerd. Dit is in het voordeel van de broers die de grond onder hun controle hebben en soms trucjes uithalen om hun zus om de tuin te leiden.

Het verband tussen grondbezit en ‘empowerment’ van vrouwen is complex; er is geen eenduidige relatie. Als het over het nemen van grote beslissingen gaat, zoals de verkoop van land of het uitbouwen van doortjes, heb ik geen duidelijk verschil in ‘empowerment’ van vrouwen met of zonder grondbezit gevonden; beiden hebben daarin meestal geen stem. Vrouwen beslissen wel zelf over dagelijkse huishoudelijke zaken. Sommige vrouwen hadden wel invloed op belangrijke zaken, maar dat hield meer verband met de status van haar ouders, haar intelligentie, zakelijk inzicht en/of sterke persoonlijkheid, en de relatie met haar echtgenoot.

Uit mijn onderzoek blijkt dat niet zozeer het bezit van als wel controle over het gebruik van grond een voorwaarde voor ‘empowerment’ is. De grond van vrouwen bleef in meeste gevallen onder de controle van hun broers en in sommige gevallen van hun echtgenoot of zonen. Mijn onderzoek laat zien dat de patriarchale ideologie van ondergeschiktheid en economische afhankelijkheid van de vrouw - eerst van haar vader, dan van haar echtgenoot en tenslotte van haar zoons, - het belangrijkste obstakel vormt voor vrouwen om controle over grond te krijgen. Deze ideologie zit diep verankerd in het denken van de mensen, ook van wetenschappers, ontwikkelingswerkers en beleidsmakers. Daarom worden dit soort factoren vaak niet onderkend. Dit heeft de marginalisering van vrouwen in de landbouw verder in de hand gewerkt.

Mijn onderzoekresultaten tonen ook aan dat er verschil is tussen machtsverhoudingen binnen de diverse sociale relaties - het huwelijk, gezin, de schenfamilie, de ouderlijke familie of de dorpsgemeenschap. In de ene positie heeft een vrouw meer speelruimte dan in de andere en haar overwegingen voor de keuzes die ze maakt verschillen vaak per positie. Dus niet alleen moet de relatie tussen grondbezit en ‘empowerment’ binnen het huishouden geanalyseerd worden, maar ook
binnen andere sociale relaties. Ook de samenstelling van het huishouden speelt een rol. Een jonge vrouw die in een samengesteld huishouden met haar man en schoonfamilie woont heeft meestal minder te vertellen dan als ze in een enkelvoudig huishouden met alleen haar man en kinderen woont.

Er is geen duidelijk verschil geconstateerd in geweld tegen vrouwen met en vrouwen zonder grondbezit. Geweld tegen vrouwen of de dreiging ervan komt regelmatig voor in alle klassen en wordt door mannen vooral gebruikt om gezag af te dwingen en ook om morele waarden en normen op te dringen, zoals onderdanigheid. Vrouwen gedragen zich vaak rolbevestigend om de dreiging van geweld te vermijden. Door zich aan deze normen te houden doen ze zichzelf geweld aan. Maar er zijn ook vrouwen die direct of indirect protesteren tegen het geweld dat hen of andere vrouwen is aangedaan. Vrouwen zijn hierin vaak solidair.

Er is geen eenduidig verband gevonden tussen grondbezit en roldoorbrekende keuzes die vrouwen maken en die de ongelijke verhoudingen en normen en waarden van de bestaande patriarchale klassenmaatschappij aan de kaak stellen. Keuzes maken, die de belemmeringen die vrouwen ondervinden bij het verkrijgen van grond en de controle over aanwechheden, betekent ook risico durven lopen. Vooral weduwen, gescheiden vrouwen zonder volwassen zonen en landloze vrouwen bleken dergelijke keuzes te maken. Zij staan niet of minder onder controle van een echtgenoot of zonen en hebben daardoor meer ruimte om buiten de bestaande machtsverhoudingen te treden. Bovendien maken arme vrouwen zich niet erg druk over hun status, ze hebben wat dat betreft niets te verliezen. Deze vrouwen zijn in de eerste plaats de pioniers van verandering.


Over het geheel genomen is er minder schrijnende honger dan in 1974/75 en vrouwen hebben de grenzen van normen en waarden verder opgerekt, maar de veranderingen hebben vooralsnog de bestaande machtsverhoudingen niet wezenlijk veranderd.
Al deze resultaten leiden tot suggesties voor verder onderzoek. Omdat grondbezit en met name de controle hierover belangrijk voor de positie van vrouwen is, dient daar in de toekomst meer aandacht aan te worden besteed. De bevinding dat grondbezit voor vrouwen niet altijd een bron van ‘empowerment’ is in haar sociale relaties mag niet als argument worden gebruikt tegen het recht van vrouwen op grondbezit. Integendeel, het is een argument voor controle van vrouwen over hun grond, niet alleen in individuele gevallen, maar structureel voor alle vrouwen, dus ook vastgelegd in wetten en regelgeving die daadwerkelijk wordt uitgevoerd. Dan zou grondbezit voor een vrouw ‘empowerment’ en bestaanszekerheid betekenen. Controle over grond is essentieel en zal gewaarborgd moeten worden. Dit betekent niet alleen registratie, maar vooral het erkennen van de rol van vrouwen in het productieproces, naast die in de reproductie. Daarbij is verder noodzakelijk dat vrouwen de benodigde kennis en vaardigheden wordt bijgebracht. De mogelijkheden van het collectief beheren van de grond moeten hierbij worden onderzocht. Collectieve actie zal hun positie versterken en risico’s verminderen; tegelijkertijd zal dit op zich een sociale verandering zijn. Ook kan worden gedacht aan het collectief beheren van andere productiemiddelen zoals irrigatiepompen, visvijvers, koeien en ossenkarren, of het gezamenlijk inkopen van rijst en die koken, drogen, pellen en verhandelen. Arme vrouwen zouden hierin het voortouw kunnen nemen. Hierbij is het bovendien van belang dat het niet alleen om hervordering van productiemiddelen moet gaan, maar ook om een verandering in productiewijze. Dat laatste is even essentieel als een duurzame, ecologisch verantwoorde economie, goede gezondheid en uitroeiing van armoede.

Tot slot, structurele verandering van ongelijke machtsverhoudingen en onrechtvaardige structuren impliceert ook een transformatie van eeuwenoude ideologieën en praktijk. Dit vereist een dialectisch proces van verenigde krachten van vrouwen en mannen om een fundamentele verandering in het gedachtengoed van mensen, van een hierarchisch exclusief denken naar een inclusief en gelijkheidsdenken en dit in praktijk te brengen. Gemarginaliseerde en uitgesloten arme vrouwen en mannen kunnen zich niet permitteren om te wachten tot de staat, NGOs of andere instellingen dit op zich nemen. Hun eigen leiderschap, ondersteund door anderen, zal uiteindelijk de gewenste structurele veranderingen in de machtsverhoudingen tot stand brengen. Dit is een lang en gecompliceerd proces dat een aantal generaties in beslag zal nemen, veel langer dan de 35 jaar die dit onderzoek beslaat.
Women, land and power in Bangladesh; Jhagapur revisited