Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited
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8 Women’s empowerment in the family and the community

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. 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.

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).
8.2 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.
Box 8.5 Hazera is in control of the household income

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 maunds, 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...
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 ‘poushan’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 ‘poushan’ 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 any 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.