Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited
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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 change 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/empowerment? 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 empowerment 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 empowerment. 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 empowers 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 relationship 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 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 transformative. 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.