Women, land and power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur revisited

Arens, A.M.J.

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This study is about the relationship between women, land, empowerment and social transformation. Since long, feminist activists and scholars have pointed out that the subordinate position of women and their low social status are related to the fact that they are largely excluded from the means of production. Therefore, they have been demanding equal rights for women to land and other means of production. Bina Agarwal (1994) has argued that land ownership empowers women to challenge and change structural inequalities. This study explores Agarwal’s argument. What is women’s relationship to land? Do women who own land have more power in their social relations and control over their own lives than women who do not, and does land empower them to play a role in a structural social transformation of gender and class relations? Theories and debates on women’s land rights, structure-agency and women’s agency/empowerment have been used to examine these questions as well as factors that enable or constrain women’s land ownership and empowerment and class differences in these. I have examined these questions through participant observation and informal talks and interviews during different periods of fieldwork in Jhagrapur (pseudonym), a village in western Bangladesh between 1975 and 2009. In the concept of empowerment I have emphasised the aspect of structural transformation which has been lost in a lot of the development literature and practice, while it is the essence of empowerment if we are concerned with structural social change. For the assessment of empowerment, I have drawn largely on Kabeer’s analysis of empowerment (Kabeer 1999).

My aim is to contribute to theories and debates on processes of structural transformation of Bangladesh society, in particular with regard to unequal gender and class relations, and their applications in practice. My main social motivation to take up this study lies in the subjugated and extremely precarious situation of poor peasant women (and men), in Bangladesh. With this study, I hope to contribute to an insight on how land ownership could mean significant structural improvement in their lives.

Bangladesh society is a country in transition, both economically and socially. In 1974/75 when I first lived in Jhagrapur to do a study on power relations, the bloody 1971 war of independence against Pakistani domination was still fresh in the minds of the people and the land was economically in shatters. Western donor governments and international financing institutions pumped billions of dollars into the country and for a long time Bangladesh was one of the top priority countries for ‘development aid’. When I started the present study in 1998, the export of garments and remittances of Bangladeshi migrant labourers abroad had become the major source of foreign income and neo-liberal forces and transnational corporations had penetrated rural areas. Many households now have a television and use commercial product likes toothpaste, lipstick and mobile phones. Infrastructure has improved and the influence of the media and the ‘free market’ are clearly noticeable. People are much more aware and knowledgeable of the world outside the village. An important change in rural areas of Bangladesh has been the introduction of the Green Revolution which has had tremendous economic as well as social consequences.
that are also clearly noticeable in Jhagrapur. With the Green Revolution, new agrarian technology was introduced that allowed paddy to be cultivated two to three times a year instead of once or twice and paddy yields more than doubled. At the same time, fertiliser and pesticides became compulsory and the special HYV (High Yielding Variety) seeds, produced by transnational companies, had to be bought (instead of preserved). As a result, the cost of paddy cultivation increased and peasants had to take loans to finance the cultivation of their land. Many poor peasants became highly indebted gradually losing their land and becoming dependent on daily wage labour. In Jhagrapur, the percentage of poor peasant households increased from 54 percent in 1975 to 65 percent in 1999 and where in 1975 the richest 20 percent of the households owned 60 percent of the land in 1999 this had increased to 72 percent. With an extra cycle of paddy cultivation there was more work for agricultural labourers and in Jhagrapur even a shortage of labourers arose in the peak seasons which resulted in daily wages also increasing. But women in Bangladesh mostly do not work on the land and with the agricultural transformation women lost part of their productive post-harvest work. For poor peasant women this meant a loss of their most important source of income - boiling and husking paddy and grinding wheat. To process the increased paddy yields rice mills were introduced and they took over the women’s work. Especially for landless widows and divorced women survival became very difficult, especially if they did not have any grown up sons who could work as day labourer. As they often said, a small plot of land would have made a lot of difference for their livelihood security and survival. Land in Bangladesh is the most important means of production, but the major part of the land is owned by men. Realising the importance of land for the survival of their wives, a few men in the village have given their wives a plot of land registered in their name “for when I’m gone”.

The economic transformation that started with the Green Revolution had consequences for social relations and norms and values as well. An important change in marriage customs was that in all classes bridegrooms and their parents started demanding high sums of money as dowry from the family of the bride. This practice led to a further impoverishment of poor families with daughters and an increase in violence against women. On the other hand, for families with sons it became an easy way to acquire a large sum of money.

Other relevant developments since 1975 are the increased participation of girls in education, the use of contraceptives (mostly by women) to reduce the number of children, the introduction of NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations), microfinance, and the increased mobility and visibility of women in public spaces. In reaction to this there was a growing influence of political Islam, but this did not get much support in Jhagrapur.

Eighty-five percent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, about ten percent is Hindu and the rest is Buddhist, Christian or Animist. Because there is only one Hindu family in Jhagrapur this study deals only with Muslim women. Muslim
women in Bangladesh have the right to inherit and to own land. They inherit a one-third share while their brothers inherit two-thirds of their parents’ property. Women’s organisations have demanded equal inheritance for women since long and even though the government has pledged to introduce equal rights for women, conservative Islamic forces have so far successfully resisted this. Landless women also have the right to khas land (fallow government land), but none of the landless women in Jhagrapur have received any of this land. Women obtain land mostly through inheritance. Only a few women possess purchased land; in 2007 this was only 11 percent of the women.

Both in 1975 as in 2007 about one-third of the women surveyed owned inherited land. Of the women I had asked about their land inheritance in 1974/75 as many as three-fourth had received their inheritance share by 2007. This means that age and life cycle play a role in inheritance as women usually take or get their share only after both parents have died. I did not find any significant class differences between women with regard to inheritance. But there are class differences as well as differences in marital status with regard to women’s control over the land that they own. Widows, divorced women and women whose husband works abroad managed the cultivation of their land by themselves and decided how to utilise its produce. The facts that women in Bangladesh generally do not work on the land and that their role in the production process is not acknowledged or undervalued are other factors that constrain women’s control over land. Besides, due to expensive and complicated registration procedures, land is often not registered in the name of the rightful heir until years after the death of the parents. This is advantageous for women’s brothers who have the land in their control; they often play tricks to deceive their sisters and appropriate their shares.

The relation between land ownership and empowerment of women is complicated and far from one-dimensional. Taking decision-making as an indicator of empowerment, I did not find any clear difference between women who own land and women who do not. Women do take their own decisions regarding daily household affairs, but regardless of whether they own land or not, most women do not have a voice in final decisions over major issues like the sale or mortgage of land or the choice of bridegroom for a daughter. Some women did have a major say in important decisions, but this was not related to land ownership, but rather due to the status of their parents, their intelligence, their managerial skills and knowledge, their strong personality and the kind of relationship they had with their husbands.

My findings indicate that control over land and its produce rather than ownership as such is a necessary condition for empowerment. Only few women are in control of their own land; in most cases brothers and in some cases husbands or sons are in control of a woman’s land. The patriarchal ideology of women’s subordination to and economic dependence on men - first her father, then her husband and finally her sons - is the most important obstacle for women to have control over their own land. This ideology is deeply rooted in people’s minds, not only of people at
the grassroots but also of scientists, development workers and policymakers. That is the reason why these factors are often not recognised which has contributed to the further marginalisation of women in agriculture.

My findings also indicate that power relations vary within the various social arenas - marriage, household, kinship or community. In one arena a woman may have more power than in another and her choices may differ depending on where she finds herself. Therefore, it is important to study not only the relation between land ownership and empowerment within the household, but also within other social relations. The composition of the household plays a role as well. A young woman in a joint family with her in-laws not only has to face the authority of her husband but also of her in-laws.

I did not study violence against women systematically, but from the incidents of violence that I witnessed and heard of I did not get the impression that there is a clear difference in (the threat of), violence against women with or without land. Violence against women occurs in all classes and is mostly used by men to assert their authority and enforce gendered moral values like submissiveness of women. Women often conform to patriarchal norms and values to avoid the (threat of), violence. But there are women who protest against violence, openly or in an indirect way and individually or collectively.

I also did not find a clear relation between women’s land ownership and choices they make to challenge unequal gender or class relations and oppressive norms and values. To make choices that challenge social constraints to obtain land and the control over it also means taking risks. In particular widows and divorced women without adult sons were prepared to take such risks; without an adult male in their household to control them, they have more space to manoeuvre outside existing power relations and act in their own interest. Also, landless women are more prepared to defy oppressive gender norms and power relations as their main interest is their survival and the survival of their household members; they have much less to lose. These women are first of all pioneers of change.

Finally, we arrive at the question whether processes of transformation that have taken place point towards structural changes or whether they merely change the appearance of existing unequal gender and class relations. On the one hand, the changes that have taken place have given women more space. Women are more organised and visible in public spaces and their subjugated position is more acknowledged. Women have more freedom of choice with regard to childbirth and more girls take part in secondary and higher education. On the other hand, women in rural Bangladesh have been pushed further out of the production process and poor peasant women have lost their most important sources of income, without getting alternative employment possibilities. These developments have increased class differences between women. Moreover, the penetration of dowry demands in all classes of society and the exponential rise of the amount of the demands has
led to a further impoverishment of poor peasant households with more daughters. The rise of microfinance programmes targeting women is unable to reverse this impoverishment because landless women without adult male members in their households are denied microfinance loans. Besides, microfinance has further indebted poor households and even contributed to the rise of dowry demands.

On the whole, there is less blatant starvation and women have stretched the boundaries of oppressive norms and values, but the changes have not uprooted existing inequalities and subjugating hierarchies.

From the results of this study suggestions for further research can be formulated. Because land ownership and, more particularly, control over land is important for women’s livelihood security and for their position, the issue of women’s land rights needs to feature in studies on land relations and in studies on class and gender relations. It needs to be emphasised that the finding that land ownership does not always directly leads to empowerment in their social relations, should not be used as an argument against women’s right to land. On the contrary, it is an argument for women’s control over their property, not only in individual cases, but in a structural way, for all women, laid down in laws and regulations that are truly implemented. Only then will land ownership empower women and give them livelihood security. This means not only registration of land in women’s names, but also full recognition of their role in the production process, next to their reproductive roles. Women’s control over land also requires that they are given the necessary skills and facilities. Collective management of their land as a possibility for more effective control also needs to be further examined. Collective action may structurally strengthen women’s position and reduce the risks involved. The possibilities of collective management of other means of production, such as irrigation pumps, fish ponds, oxen and buffalo carts or collectively buying, processing and selling of paddy can be looked into as well. Poor peasant women could take the lead in this. It should also be realised that the issue is not just a redistribution of the means of production, but that a solution should also include a different mode of production that is ecologically sustainable and improves rather than deteriorates people’s health.

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