
Feminist Economics Research

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These three volumes are a monumental achievement. They contain 28 of Bina Agarwal's selected papers published from 1981 to 2011 on gender perspectives in rural and agricultural development, land and property rights, and access to the commons. These do not constitute her total output: she has also published nine books and 82 papers. The achievement lies, however, not in the number of publications nor the diversity of topics covered, but the intellectual breadth, penetrating insightfulness, methodological firmness, and theoretical contributions of Agarwal's work. In the course of the review she provides significant critiques of other luminaries in the field, Elinor Ostrom and Amartya Sen among them. For this review, I shall consider each volume separately.

Agriculture and Technology

The Volume 1 is animated by an interest in the gender unequal impact of technological change on agriculture. It begins with a sweeping analysis of the effects of agricultural modernisation on women across Asia and Africa, based on a highly valuable analytical overview from the literature, as well as original empirical work from India. Especially impressive is its detail and depth: to consider how technology affects labour use, she examines variations by type of technology, farm size, soil types, crops grown, irrigation sources, and energy used (animal, tractor, etc). Employment is further disaggregated by types of labour (casual or permanent, male or female), by seasons, and agricultural tasks. Her meticulous analysis helps her challenge both mainstream research and standing feminist assumptions that farm mechanisation necessarily displaces female labour. She demonstrates that it depends on the type of mechanisation. Using tractors in ploughing, for instance does not displace women since they do not plough,

BOOK REVIEWS

Gender Challenges (3 Volumes) by Bina Agarwal,
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while mechanising irrigation through tube wells in fact increases female labour demand since farmers can then grow additional crops which need more female labour. The introduction of threshers and combined harvesters could however displace both male and female casual labour.

Agarwal was also an early contributor to research on innovation adoption and diffusion. Challenging then dominant views that diffusion basically required awareness raising and persuasion, she argued in her 1983 *World Development* paper that diffusion depends on the technical, economic and social characteristics of the innovation. Many innovations, such as wood stoves, require adaptation to user needs, or community cooperation, as for managing water reservoirs or forests. Without an assurance that costs and benefits will be shared equitably, communities will not cooperate, and cooperation requires social equality. Failure of the underprivileged to adopt innovations does not reflect irrationality, she argues, but their material and social disadvantage. She strongly advocates bottom-up diffusion processes, and the involvement of end-users when designing or adapting a new technology for their use.

Measuring women's work: Methodologically, Agarwal is thorough and demanding at many levels. First, in her essay on women, agricultural growth and poverty, she shows how the assessment period makes a crucial difference to the results. She was also one of the earliest scholars to bring into the debate on female adverse sex ratios the invisibility of women's work and marriage

expenditures as explanatory factors. Second, in a 1980s essay, she was one of the first scholars to highlight how Indian women's productive work is grossly undercounted in the census and national sample surveys due to biases in the definition of work as well as in the recording of women's work by male respondents and enumerators. Today, three decades later, we are still grappling with the problem of undercounting women's work and their low labour force participation, and Agarwal's writings continue to be relevant.

Indeed, Agarwal's essays argue for a reconceptualisation of the nature of work. For women, she argues, work should include both waged and non-waged activities that are economically productive. Expanding the definition involves both developing a firmer distinction between domestic and non-domestic work, and making a greater investment in laborious time-use studies that provide a different currency for assessing contributions to the household and the larger economy. Agarwal is aware of this cost, and suggests how existing data sources could be improved upon by using special modules, while also emphasising the critical importance of gender-disaggregated data for accurate policy formulation.

A further problem is male bias in assessing the productivity of women's work even by academics. They tend to treat female labour as equivalent to half of male labour, based on the assumption that women are less efficient because their wages are generally half to three-quarters of men's. Labour market discrimination thus gets embedded as a measure of productivity. Agarwal challenges this assumption, using experimental data from the Punjab Agricultural University, which shows women workers to be more productive than men in the tasks tested.

In several essays, Agarwal also shows how gender analysis must be disaggregated by class. For instance, introduction of high-yielding variety technology in rice cultivation increased wage opportunities for poor women, while causing

women in more prosperous households to withdraw from the labour force for reasons of family prestige. Their withdrawal made their work invisible (and possibly reduced their bargaining power at home) without reducing their work burden, since many still had to cook for hired labourers during peak seasons.

Theoretical interventions: Theoretically, the volume makes a vigorous argument for reconceptualising the household. This constitutes a major shift from standard economic analysis and policy prescriptions. Assembling data from many sources that demonstrate intra-household inequalities in food distribution, access to healthcare, leisure time, and the burden of poverty, she rejects the unitary household model in favour of a bargaining approach. Women characteristically have less bargaining power than men, so they are more likely to suffer when resources become scarce. Most tragically this occurs in situations of famine, when family ties often dissolve and husbands abandon wives and children.

How the family is conceptualised can make an important difference to policy. If the family is seen as headed by an altruistic head who seeks to maximise everyone's welfare, the policy approach can be to augment the resources of the family head, usually a male. A bargaining model, however, would suggest that resources be directed to the weaker members, generally women, to help them bargain more effectively for a better share.

Many of these ideas may now seem familiar—in large part because of Agarwal's writings—but the logic underlying them may not. Having them altogether in a single volume is thus extremely valuable. Her massive reviews of the literature, both Indian and international, provide a bibliographic compendium for the field. More importantly, the volume enables us to see how the ideas build on each other and create a comprehensive argument for viewing agricultural farming systems through a gender lens. She concludes,

the inequalities women face as producers reduce the potential productivity of agriculture and hence of overall food availability in countries, regions, and globally ... Reducing

inequalities embedded in women's access to income-earning opportunities and productive assets would not only benefit women themselves but also their children, by enhancing women's bargaining power within the home, and so their ability to direct more household resources to children's well-being. (p 341)

This volume reflects an interesting evolution over time. The early papers are somewhat pessimistic. They catalogue a multitude of problems faced by women and much evidence of neglect in theory, data collection and policy. As I experienced in my own teaching of "Women and Development" in the early days, it was hard to imagine how to start addressing all the issues. Yet as the papers advance in time, Agarwal increasingly identifies pathways for change.

The volume concludes with a futuristic argument in a 2010 paper on the importance of cooperative farming to make agriculture viable for small farmers, and especially women farmers. As is her wont, Agarwal based her argument on data, penetrating field observations and analysis, drawing on examples from several countries, including Europe. Building on her interest in institutional factors that underlie economic decisions, she explores how new structural arrangements can create a non-exploitative basis for gains from group-based patterns of land use and labour deployment, replacing historical networks governed by patronage.

My only regret about the first volume is its title. Though its emphasis on gender is certainly a capacious, ambitious and significant theme, the volume is much more than that. It should be required reading for anyone concerned with

agricultural economics, rural development, environmental studies and all related fields. It does not require an interest in gender to reward concentrated study.

Property, Family and State

While Volume 1 is basically a critique of existing practice, Volume 2 is more radical. It makes a fundamental critique of Indian law, poses a number of unsettling questions, and calls for a qualitative change in the nature of family life.

The core of the volume is an investigation of women's rights over property and their capacity to fulfil these rights. Readers would be familiar with her award-winning book, *A Field of One's Own* (1994), but this volume gives us not only some of the central arguments in that book but also her subsequent work, including the link between owning property and reducing the risk of domestic violence, and the role of property ownership in enhancing women's bargaining power within and outside the family.

In Volume 2, Agarwal pursues her subjects in a manner similar to that in the Volume 1: first highlighting how the issue has been treated or ignored by others, then probing conceptual meanings of terms such as "rights to land," and finally elaborating why the issue is so important. She notes that women's rights to property have been neglected not only by mainstream scholars, but also by two communities of scholars from whom we might have expected otherwise: the left, whose ideological goal to end private property left them largely insensitive to gender differences in ownership, and ethnographers whose inquiries into the bases for women's subordination

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Social Policy

Edited by JEAN DRÈZE

The reach of social policy in India has expanded significantly in recent years. Reaching larger numbers of people than before, some benefits now take the form of enforceable legal entitlements. Yet the performance of social programmes is far from ideal, with still a long way to go in directly addressing the interests, demands and rights of the unprivileged.

This collection of essays is clustered around six major themes: health, education, food security, employment guarantee, pensions and cash transfers, and inequality and social exclusion.

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focused on cultures rather than their material foundations. She makes clear that her concern is not simply a loosely defined notion of access to land or joint ownership with men, but women's independent ownership and control over land use and its produce.

Owning resource: The first paper in the volume, published in *World Development* just before her book was released, provides a succinct overview of major arguments in that book, including the welfare, equity and efficiency arguments for being concerned with women's property rights across South Asia.

She argues that having independent rights to land is crucial for women's well-being and physical safety. She draws on her findings in Volume 1 that due to unequal resource distribution within households, women and children may suffer deprivations even among the well-off. Marital disruption, male urban migration or widowhood may affect women of all classes leaving them vulnerable. Land is the most important economic resource in an agricultural society, more stable than non-farm earnings for women, which are characteristically low and uncertain. Further, landownership increases women's bargaining power and access to credit, inputs and markets.

In a sweeping review, Agarwal explains differences in property rights between matrilineal and bilateral communities, regional differences between northern and southern South Asia, the role of cross-cousin marriages in preserving land within families, and the disempowering impact on women of village exogamy. She makes the notable observation that cultural factors are much stronger than religious differences in defining women's property and social status in South Asia. For instance, in practice Hindu women's property rights in North West India tended to be more similar to those of Muslim women in that region than to South Indian Hindu women. Further, even in matrilineal communities, where property goes through the female line, property management remains in male hands.

A particularly striking paper based on primary data from Kerala shows how

women owning houses or land were less subject to domestic violence. Ensuring landownership, she argues, is a major way of empowering women and enabling them to challenge power relationships that subordinate them economically, socially and politically. This definition of empowerment is more radical than the rather comfortable one resting on self-confidence and personal mobility that is generally used in development literature.

Law and inheritance: Agarwal's research into property laws in India is exhaustive, unprecedented and a work of immense erudition. In her paper "Women and Legal Rights in Agricultural Land" written and published in 1995, that is after her book, she provides not only an historical overview of Indian women's limited rights in inheritance but also details for every single state the legal inequalities in agricultural land and immovable property after the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. In one of the major achievements of this volume, she cites the legislative source in every case, lists the devolution of agricultural tenancies:

first order heirs, etc; examines the definitions of family in land ceiling legislation; and then reports on the devolution of agricultural land by state and religion. She notes that inheritance laws in post-independent India continued to vary not only by religion but also by region and type of property. Land was treated as different from other property, and subject to the differing land tenure laws of each state. Further, she reviews the personal laws of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsis, and traces gender differences in each, showing reforms towards equality in some but not in others.

Since Agarwal wrote that paper, Hindu inheritance law has changed momentarily; a change in which Agarwal herself played a major role. As of the 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act, men and women are legally equal in their right to succession of both joint and individually held property, to alienate it, and to reside in or seek the parental dwelling house. Making their rights real in practice is now the primary concern. Agarwal notes a structural mismatch between the liberal Hindu inheritance

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law and traditional patriarchal (my word) practices. She details the many ways and justifications used by brothers, other male relatives and local officials to deprive women of their inheritance rights.

Agarwal explores this problem in a detailed analysis of widows and daughters. Until the 2005 amendment, inheritance laws in North India favoured males, allowing widow inheritance only if there were no male heirs and then only during her lifetime, after which the land reverted to the male line. Practice still adheres closely to traditional Hindu law in North India, though less so in the South: widows usually lose inherited land should they remarry, have no sons, or move out of the village. Widows seldom enjoy independent control over land they own. This is a customary system built on the compunction to keep land within the family or kin group, which could be violated if the women controlled the land and could alienate it. The cross-cousin marriages in the South provide an alternative way of preserving family land, allowing more liberal treatment of widows. Daughters are in even more vulnerable position than widows, for they often forfeit their inheritance rights to brothers in order to preserve access to brothers' support in the case of marital break-up or widowhood. This analysis is by now familiar due to publishing by Agarwal and other feminist scholars, but it remains compelling due to the critical need for women to own and control land.

Agarwal's description of the political dynamic of the 2005 campaign to amend the Hindu Succession Act reveals much about the current women's movement in India. As the contemporary movement gained momentum, activist women's attention shifted away from pre-independence women's movement concerns with property and inheritance to other issues: employment, violence against women, microcredit, etc. (This may reflect the changing social base of the movement.) About the same time, Hindu right politics had adopted the proposal for a Uniform Civil Code, raising fears that such a code could become tilted toward orthodox Hinduism. Therefore women's advocates divided over strategy and ceased to exert pressure for further

property reform. Nor is there a strong constituency for needed changes in Muslim law and customary tribal law.

Inheritance is, however, only one of three possible sources of land for women, the other two being the state and the market. Agarwal's investigation of land ceiling legislation and practice shows the same pattern of gender inequity as in inheritance. Ironically, a constitutional provision (in the ninth schedule) passed to protect land reform legislation from legal challenge prevents these provisions from being challenged on the grounds of gender discrimination. Land resettlement schemes show similar bias in the counting of adult sons and daughters.

A third potential source of land, the market, is generally assumed to be unavailable, for little land is transferred outside families and women do not have the resources to purchase it. However, Agarwal proposes an unconventional if not radical approach: group farming by women-only groups. She argues that government land made available for distribution to landless labourers could be leased or purchased by groups of women. Agarwal is currently researching such groups.

The other seminal paper in this volume is on bargaining and gender relations. Agarwal provides a full-blown critique of unitary households models (a discussion begun in Volume 1). She spells out how bargaining models are better able to explain intra-household inequalities and extends the model to show linkages between bargaining outcomes in four different arenas: the family, the community, the market, and the state. The factors that can affect women's bargaining power go much beyond income to include private property ownership, access to the commons, social support systems, and most of all social norms and social perceptions.

As a theoretical framework, she postulates that social norms can set limits to women's ability to bargain over economic resources within the family (illustrated by compelling anthropological evidence). Moreover, she argues that social norms (which social scientists usually take as given) can themselves be the subject of bargaining, giving examples

from how poor women in Bangladesh renegotiated purdah norms when they took up income generating work in groups. Agarwal also provides a critique of assumptions by some economists (including Amartya Sen) that women can be complicit in their own subjugation because they lack a strong sense of self-interest. She cites varying ethnographic evidence to challenge this assumption, arguing that what holds women back is not altruism but material constraints and lack of options.

The final chapter is a feminist essay that shows the radical extent of her thinking. She is willing to take the gamble that giving women property rights might destabilise the family, or tempt women to avoid marriage, as critics fear, though she provides reasons why she thinks this will not happen. What she is looking for is a major rethinking of the Indian family and for mechanisms that will make families more "women friendly" and equal.

Readers of this volume (as in the previous one) will find that each chapter stands alone. One need not refer to previous chapters to grasp the argument in each one, although the author has undertaken a fair amount of painstaking cross-referencing across chapters.

Collective Environmental Action

The Volume 3 further highlights Agarwal's qualities as a scholar: her willingness to take on not only the establishment but also the received orthodoxies of those challenging the establishment, her capacity to turn received wisdom into empirical questions to be illuminated by data, her grace in drawing on qualitative material to illuminate rigorously extracted data, and her capacity to accept unexpected, even unwelcome, results. These are in addition to her emphasis on gender, class, and regional differentiation that continues throughout.

The volume picks up the second part of her argument on women and property, that is, their need for access to the village common property as well as to private property. The centrepiece is her primary research on women's participation in forest councils in Gujarat and Nepal, which has been published in her book *Gender and Green Governance* (2010), but

this volume contains additional writings that both frame and expand on that work. Three seminal papers on this research are the highlight of the volume.

One of my favourite pieces in her entire oeuvre is an early (1994) piece in *Feminist Studies* criticising the ecofeminist argument that women are closer to nature and collectively share the domination and oppression suffered by nature. By overdependence on the ideological bases of women's oppression and, among some ecofeminists, romanticising (Agarwal's word) the precolonial era, they fail to understand that environmental degradation is rooted not only in colonialism, but also in local forces of power and privilege. Lower-caste rural women suffer much more deprivation than others because of their dependence on forest resources and the village commons for firewood, grazing, and food-gathering. Ever the materialist, she argues that women's preponderance in Indian environmental movements lies not in their having a special relationship with nature but in their material reality. She worries that ecofeminists risk increasing poor women's already oppressive work burdens by assigning them major responsibility for protecting the environment on the mistaken idea that they are closer to nature than men irrespective of class or context.

Investigating Institutions

The substantive core of the volume is an investigation of the institutional framework governing natural resource management, not the usual topic for econometric analysis. Agarwal proceeds as before, first doing a thought experiment outlining hypotheses, then reviewing other studies, in this case her own qualitative fieldwork, and finally a rigorous analysis of quantitative data.

Agarwal's basic question is a fundamental one in social science: what makes people cooperate or not with institutional arrangements? Addressing collective action literature she notes that its emphasis on inequality largely neglects inequalities within the household, that is, gender, and that when it does address gender it focuses largely on pre-existing

sources of inequalities, neglecting how the institutions of common pool resources may create or further entrench these inequalities. Innovatively, she points out that both cooperation and non-cooperation may be involuntary as well as voluntary. Women may cooperate with collective functioning under the duress of family or community pressure, and they may not cooperate involuntarily, that is, they may be closed out from participation by institutional arrangements. From her six months of field travel across seven states of India and two districts of Nepal she outlines a typology of participation and five factors that lead to "participatory exclusions," ranging from membership rules restricting participation to only one family member (generally a male) to conservative rules of forest closure. The result is that women frequently violate community rules for forest use, poor women more than others because of their greater need for forest resources.

In the course of this discussion, Agarwal reveals the same intimate knowledge of community forestry on the lines that she showed in her investigation of agricultural techniques in Volume 1. She considers the consequences of how the forests are guarded and who pays the guards, the usefulness of women setting up informal forest patrols because they know the forest, and women's problems of getting offenders apprehended. In

subsequent chapters she examines the different rules applied to fodder and firewood collection, and that rules differ for fallen twigs, dry wood, grass fodder, timber, leaf litter and grazing. Everywhere she reports women complain about overly strict forest closures.

She then proceeds to the very important question: why does it matter? Beyond the intrinsic value of participation, does the inclusion of women in community forest groups affect forest use rules, that is, does it lead to greater leniency? And how does greater leniency affect forest conservation. To find unassailable answers to these questions she embarked on a rigorous and intensive survey of 135 community forestry institutions in Gujarat and Nepal. Her econometric analyses, which are challenging to persons unfamiliar with regression techniques, may raise a concern about sample size among some statisticians though current definitions of "big data" recognise the importance of depth as well as the number of cases. Her analyses are well-supported by qualitative interview data and rigorous probing of theory, as well as by interviews with a variety of local persons consulted through a series of nine different questionnaires in each village. In the inevitable trade-off between in-depth research and large-scale data sets, Agarwal's balanced choice seems the most rewarding. Indeed, a systematic global review of gender and forest conservation

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studies rated Agarwal's as having high internal validity for its use of before and after variables in multiple impact and control sites.

Feminist Economics

Her findings include many welcome results and an unanticipated one. For feminist readers, she substantiates a widely used, but largely unsubstantiated assumption that having one-third women in decision-making bodies makes a difference in participation and decision-making. Agarwal's measurements show the critical mass in the community forestry councils lies between 25% and 33%. This makes for effective participation: attending meetings and speaking up at them landless women are likely to speak up even in the face of great inequality if there is a critical mass of them.

Unanticipated was a finding that greater representation of women led to stricter rules for forest use. To Agarwal's credit

she did not shy away from this finding, but used it to probe differences among her various survey sites and found important class differences. Where a higher proportion of women on the committee were landless, the rules adopted were more lenient, reflecting their greater need for forest resources.

Perhaps, the most significant finding was the impact of women's participation on forest conservation and regeneration. Using a variety of indicators that should convince even the most doubting non-feminist (biomass measurements, forester assessments, etc) she shows that forests governed by councils with more women—even landless women or entirely women (sites in Nepal)—were in better condition at the time of the survey and showed greater improvement over the period since protection began. When women shared in decision-making, they were more likely to cooperate with the rules. This is work that would

reward duplication in many other contexts, water use being one.

It is also a model for feminist analyses to influence mainstream economics. In an interesting afterword she reviews the field of feminist economics to identify the characteristics that have most effectively challenged mainstream economics: those that use mainstream theory as a point of departure, are expressed in formal models, can be quantified, and led to policy shifts with significant efficiency or equity benefits. But she further argues that feminist economists should have their own criteria for evaluation beyond challenging the mainstream. They have not only an intellectual responsibility to understand gender inequality in all its forms, but also an ethical responsibility for changing it. Therein lies the real challenge.

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