



Assets, Agency and Legitimacy: Towards a Relational Understanding of Gender Equality Policy and Practice

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Summary. — Gender equality policies seeking to give women assets, particularly land, have often failed to achieve their goals. Explained as a failure of implementation and adequate resourcing, the deeper problem lies in using a segmented rather than holistic analytical framework that treats both assets and women as discrete, individual objects, rather than socially embedded and networked. Land gives meaning to people’s lives, it is more than a source of material wealth; hence access to land is coveted, contested and negotiated in multiple ways by differently positioned people. Drawing on long-term primary research in India, as well as secondary research in China and Indonesia, in relation to women’s access to land, I unpack some of the complexities and contradictions in terms of both legal and social interpretations of legitimacy as well as women’s agency. Apart from having a large proportion of their population dependent on agriculture, the choice of countries is also useful in constructing typologies of governance systems and social relations at different institutional levels that shape women’s access to land, a prime one being inheritance. I demonstrate the need for an alternate, relational framework that is both dynamic and transcends binaries, unpacking the multidimensionality of women’s agency vis-a-vis assets, in diverse livelihood, environmental and governance contexts, if gender equality goals are to be met.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Women’s access to and control over economic resources, particularly land, is an important pathway to gender equality, alongside addressing material deprivation and building stable livelihoods. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG) on Gender Equality, states: “Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.”¹

Various state policies have sought to enhance women’s access to productive assets like land and credit, particularly in the context of widespread male migration and the feminization of agricultural work in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia. These policies have not succeeded much on the ground. The State of Food and Agriculture Report 2012, focusing on gender gaps in agriculture, noted that women on average own 10–12% of the world’s agricultural land, allowing for some variations across (and within) countries (FAO, 2011). An improvement from the 1% reported in 1980 (UN, 1980), this is yet far from equitable. Achievement gaps are explained as implementation failures, inadequate monitoring and resourcing, rather than due to analytical frameworks that conceptualize both assets and women as discrete variables, not socially embedded and networked.

Persistent binarisms of male–female, nature–culture, structure–agency, materiality and discourse, not just overlook the gendered meanings of both assets and agency as relational, and hence dynamic, but set up hierarchical relations of value and power. Within such a framework, women as individuals, lacking in assets, are seen as “objects” for policy assistance, not just denying their agency, but equally the long-standing oppressive structures, and the tensions and exclusions they generate across institutions of the state and society (Haraway, 1988). Land and gender, in this case, are not two oppositional entities, but part of a larger social, political,

economic, ecological and theological environment (Haraway, 1992), situated within a temporal and spatial context. Such an approach takes one away from methodological individualism to recognizing the ontological inseparability of agents—that people make sense of the world through the relationships in which they are embedded.

Frameworks analyzing rural poverty and livelihood assets, do mention the need to consider the wider contexts of development, diversification and the accompanying processes of change that mediate risks and vulnerabilities on the ground (Ellis, 2000; Rigg, 2006). Yet the inter-linkages between the larger global and national governance and economic structures, the power and politics embedded therein (Scoones, 2009), and the longer-term changes in the ecological and agrarian structure that shape gender relations and social identities, are often missed. Structural and ecological contexts are taken as static, labelled as “progressive” or “laggard” (World Bank, 2007), their influence in co-constructing relationships of both difference and complementarity, not fully incorporated in most analyses. The same plot of land, for instance, can signify different relationships of value and meaning in response to shifts in tenure, land use priorities and cropping patterns, degrees of mechanization, scale of operations and even political regimes. State institutions too don’t exist in isolation, their policies subject to contradictory pressures: the international rights frameworks on the one hand and liberal trade regimes on the other. Through discrete, sector mechanisms, states can marginalize the rights of communities including women, while upholding a general right to productive resources.

The implication of such a relational theory of human agency for both research and practice is an emphasis on the dynamics of interactions, both human and non-human, signifying relations of power of authority, and their historical contingency, across different socio-political settings (Mische, 2011). The use of particular concepts and theories to explain these

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relationships as agential and non-deterministic, themselves indicate a political choice, as they have material consequences for livelihoods, resource control and wellbeing outcomes (c.f. Hekman, 2008).

In this paper, drawing on Asian experiences, I point to the inadequacy of uniform and universal frameworks that do not take account of relational and contextual parameters for understanding the larger questions of poverty, livelihoods and gender equality. Using the variability in women's access to assets, in particular, land, despite legal equality, as a case in point, I develop an alternate conceptualization that gives value to a plurality of perspectives, experiences and actions, in a context of deepening structural inequalities. I focus on China, India and Indonesia, to highlight the influence of different governance structures and their historical specificities on social relations and identity formation, and on livelihood and production systems. These governance systems are not linear or predictable in the ways in which the "material dimensions of regulatory practices" influence the distribution of power and resources between people across institutional levels (Jagger, 2015), and the mechanisms generated for coping with change.

Both rurality and gender identity are heterogenous; there is an inherent fallacy in treating them as single categories. In fact, policy attention has often focused on female heads of households (Varley, 2007), in particular widows, rather than married women located within multiple sets of relationships, with their spouse, children, siblings, natal and marital kin, as well as external actors, whether women's collectives or institutions governing rights to water and land tenure. It is, however, this multiplicity of relationships, their simultaneous occurrence, and negotiations therein, that are constitutive of identity (both social status and resource control) (Rao, 2008); and provide possibilities for reconfiguring practices on the ground.

Using a dynamic relational approach to poverty, livelihoods and gender equality, I seek in this paper to demonstrate how values of respect and dignity, expectations of mutuality, and social and ecological relationships, within and across institutions, co-constitute people's choices, strategies and actions, and ultimately sense of wellbeing. In the next section I set out my conceptual approach to understand the links between asset control and gender equality, followed by a discussion of methodological imperatives. Empirical material is then presented to illustrate the potential of such an approach for deepening understandings of the contradictions and gaps noted in the literature. Brief conclusions on ways forward for research, policy and practice are presented in the last section.

2. ASSETS, AGENCY AND LEGITIMACY: RECONCEPTUALIZING THE LINKS

Gender equality and social justice are professed international development goals; yet the pathways from ideological commitment to shifts on the ground are complex and multidimensional. A woman may have access to "micro"-credit, but be unable to manage its use (Goetz & Sen Gupta, 1996); it may also deprive her of the opportunity to access larger sums of money. A more public life may provoke violence from husbands (Schuler, Hashemi, & Badal, 1998), at times communities; and in extreme instances, peer and societal pressure to repay loans may drive her to dispose of other assets, or even commit suicide (Biswas, 2010). If she claims a share of land, she is likely to be branded a "witch" and ostracized from everyday village life as a "bad woman" (Rao, 2013). The abil-

ity to engage with particular assets and opportunities are shaped by local and situated notions of legitimacy—social, legal and moral. I set out below the concepts of assets, agency and legitimacy, as components of and mechanisms through which wider processes of poverty reduction, livelihood security and gender equitable change can be better understood.

Assets are critical to making and sustaining livelihoods, and addressing poverty. Broadly defined as natural, physical, financial, human and social capitals (Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 1998), they are largely understood in terms of their economic values and material outcomes. Even social capital is measured in terms of the benefits accruing to an individual through participation in a collective activity. Bourdieu (1977) introduced the notion of cultural and symbolic capital, both deeply relational, and Chambers (1995) included social inferiority, isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness and humiliation as central to sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing. Yet the framework for measuring assets remains individualized and materialistic; titles for land, certification for education, the amount and frequency of credit for money. While facilitating market-based transactions, as in the "willing buyer, willing seller" model of land reform promoted globally by the World Bank (Lahiff, 2007), or educational credentialism as the criteria for employment (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004), the social-symbolic meanings of land, or indeed education, are underplayed (Rao, 2008; Street, 2011). Importantly, men and women are seen as individuals claiming ownership of a particular, quantifiable asset, and hence put in competition with each other, ignoring the larger scenario of climate change, global trade agreements, and the privatization of services, including those from the ecosystem.

Recent multidimensional understandings of poverty question the assumption of assets as mere instruments for making a living (Mosse, 2010). They recognize the multiple meanings and values—simultaneously material and symbolic, inherent in assets. Thus land is not just a productive asset and a source of material wealth, but equally a source of security, status and power (Agarwal, 1994; Bebbington, 1999; Rao, 2008). And these signifiers are not static over time or place. In Malaysia, feminization of land from the 1970s onwards, was driven partly by state construction of the rural as a backward sector, with growth seen to lie in urban, industrial areas, along with the ideological construction of women as "conservers of nature" (Stivens, Ng, & Jomo, 1994). In indigenous communities in India, such as the Kurumas in Kerala (Kunze, 2016), or the Santals in Jharkhand (Rao, 2008), on the other hand, men continue to see themselves as protectors of the land, not just owners or cultivators. This is visible in elaborate, exclusively male rituals around ancestor worship, or invoking the local Gods for protection from natural calamities. While production is joint, the ritual maleness of land is revealed in the resistance to any formal transfer of land titles to women (Rao, 2008).

Tilly (1998) emphasized the role of social ties and connections in reproducing exploitation and accumulation through sustaining exclusionary categories, what he called "durable inequality". In Bangladesh, Sen (2003) demonstrates how people escape from poverty primarily by accumulating a mix of assets, while descent is often a result of life-cycle changes and crises. Sen's analysis, though not gendered, points to changes in household structure, widowhood in particular, and the consequent inability to access assets, as a key driver of descent. In India, on the contrary, Agarwal (1998) shows how despite conditionalities regarding remarriage and residence, widows are the only group of women whose property rights are acknowledged. But this doesn't apply to all widows;

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