Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) owes its origin to the foresight and generosity of Dr. Malcolm S. Adiseshiah (1910-1994) who founded it in 1971. Research on development problems of India, with a special focus on Tamilnadu, is its principal function. In 1977, MIDS was reconstituted as a national institute jointly sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Government of India, and the Government of Tamilnadu.

Among the core areas of research are agriculture, rural development, industry, urbanisation and labour, as well as gender, environment, governance, social and political movements, and international trade.

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Malcolm S. Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture Series

GENDER INEQUALITIES:
NEGLECTED DIMENSIONS AND HIDDEN FACETS

Bina Agarwal
Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi
Bina Agarwal is an authority on women’s land rights. Her work has brought to light the myriad forms discrimination against women takes and she has focused on one extremely important component, namely, deprivation of rights to landed property. In her book, *A field of One’s Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* she argues that “land has a strategic importance that other gender concerns such as employment and education appear not to have”. In this lecture she makes the point that “one distinctive feature of gender inequality is that it “dwells not only outside the home but also centrally within it”. Further, gender inequalities while originating in differences in economic endowments are aggravated through social norms and perceptions. In the final analysis as she shows this particular inequality is constantly recreated in new forms. These conclusions are supported by a theoretical framework and rich empirical data from India as also other societies. In the light of comparative analysis she directs attention to critical issues. A major one is what consequential advantages can flow from women’s property rights: for instance, could this have an effect on domestic violence? Equally crucial is the distinction between ownership rights and use rights and managerial control over resources since the ability to frame and implement rules is just as important as ownership.

The lecture is bound to be an important addition to the literature on gender rights. It gives MIDS great pleasure to publish it in the Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture series. I would like to thank Professor Bina Agarwal for revising and updating the lecture for publication.
I am deeply honored at being selected for the Malcolm Adiseshiah award. It was an unexpected and pleasant surprise when Professor Natraj informed me about this. I thank the jury and the trustees for deeming me worthy of this honor.

I also greatly value the opportunity of delivering a lecture today in Dr. Adiseshiah's memory. Regrettably I did not have the privilege of knowing Dr. Adiseshiah personally. This regret has deepened as I have become better acquainted with his life and works - his deep involvement with significant social causes, his wide-ranging intellectual interests, his generosity of spirit, and his breadth of vision.

In particular, Dr. Adiseshiah’s engagement with the issues of inequality, poverty, environmental degradation and agrarian transformation has a special resonance for me, since these are also concerns I share. Equally, I find myself in strong agreement with him on the importance of framing these questions within a political economy and interdisciplinary perspective. My talk today will thus focus centrally on these aspects which preoccupied him for so many years. By doing so I hope that this lecture will further his quest.

I will speak on “Gender Inequalities: Neglected Dimensions and Hidden Facets”. In this I will seek to weave together several aspects of my work – some past, some current, some empirical and some theoretical.

This is a slightly revised version of the Malcolm Adiseshiah Memorial lecture 2002. In particular, this version includes examples of recent developments on women's land rights in China and the transition economies, which were not part of the original lecture. In an early form, some of these ideas were also presented in a public lecture I gave at Barnard College, Columbia University in December 2001, when I was based there as the Hirschorn visiting professor.
Gender Inequality

Rural women in northwest India, married to strangers miles away from their birth villages, use folk songs to decry their estrangement from the green pastures of their childhood homes – homes to which their brothers, who inherit the ancestral land, have automatic access. I quote excerpts from two folk songs:

To my brother belong your green fields
O father, while I am banished afar.

Always you said
Your brother and you are the same
O father. But today you betray me…
My doli leaves your house, O father
My doli leaves your house.
These dowry jewels are not jewels
but wounds around my neck, O father.
My doli leaves…

Women in Sri Lanka, by contrast, traditionally inherited immovable property, and sometimes their husbands moved in with them. But according to folklore such a husband was advised to always keep a walking stick, an umbrella, and an oil lamp handy. Why? In case his wife evicted him when he was ill, and in the rain, in the middle of the night! And some wives indeed did so.

Both examples depict gender inequality. In the first the woman has no property and social norms require her to join her husband – a dislocation she sees as banishment. In the second, the man has no property and social norms allow him to join his wife, but in a home from which he can easily be evicted. In the first example, the woman is the less equal, in the second the man.

These examples illustrate several things. They highlight that gender inequality and indeed gender in general, is a relational category. And although most times we are grappling with women’s disadvantaged position, in rare cases men too might occupy that

position. In particular, these examples highlight the importance of women’s property status and enabling social norms in determining gender relations.

Compared with other inequalities such as those of class or race, gender inequality also has some distinct features. One, it dwells not only outside the home but also centrally within it. Mainstream economic theory has long treated the household as a unitary entity in relation to both consumption and production. The unitary household model assumes that all household resources and incomes are pooled, and family members either share common interests and preferences, or an altruistic household head (who represents the household’s tastes and preferences and seeks to maximize household utility) ensures equitable allocation of goods and tasks (see also, Agarwal 1997).

Most people know from personal experience that this is not how real families behave. But academically too, in recent years, virtually every assumption of the unitary household model has been challenged effectively through empirical evidence, including assumptions of shared preferences and interests, pooled incomes, and altruism as the guiding principle of intra-household allocations. Gender, in particular, is noted to be an important signifier of differences in interests, preferences, endowments and allocations. And in alternative “bargaining models” of the household, bargaining power rather than altruism is seen as guiding intra-household allocations.

Two, gender inequalities stem not only from differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from social norms and perceptions, that is, the inequalities are also ideologically embedded. While norms and perceptions impinge on other social inequalities like race and caste as well, gendered norms and perceptions cut across these categories and exist additionally.

Three, gender inequalities not only pre-exist, new ones can arise from the foundations of the old ones, and people with prior advantage can set in place rules that perpetuate that advantage, such as rules governing new institutions now being promoted to manage common pool resources. Although based on principles of cooperation, such institutions can effectively exclude significant sections, such as women, from their decision-making bodies and their benefits. In other words,
Gender inequality can be *in the process of constant recreation in new forms.*

Gender inequality is thus a vast subject with a vast literature on it. But some aspects are more neglected and hidden than others. And it is on these aspects that I will now focus, namely:

(i) Inequality in command over property – a notably neglected dimension.

(ii) Inequalities in social perceptions and social norms, the workings of which are often hidden but which have visible economic outcomes.

The former is a significant material form of inequality, the latter a significant ideological form.

(iii) New inequalities arising in emergent institutions through the interaction of the above two dimensions of pre-existing inequalities. This will also throw light on the process of inequality creation.

In addition, I will illustrate how gender inequalities are simultaneously constituted in several arenas: the family, the community, the market and the state. And the bargaining approach provides a promising analytical framework for understanding how both the material and the ideological aspects of gender inequality can be challenged within these arenas.

**Gender Gap in Command Over Property**

(a) **The nature of the gap**

Consider first the issue of property. Economists have long emphasized the importance of property rights for incentives and efficiency. But relatively few have looked at the gender gap in command over property. And although there has been some progress on this count in recent years, it still remains a largely neglected issue. Economic analysis and policies concerning women continue to be preoccupied with employment, and relatedly with education.

In the process, inequality in command over property has largely been neglected. Yet it is this aspect of inequality which remains one of the most important forms of persisting economic inequality between women and men - one which has a critical bearing not only on women's economic well-being but also on their social and political status.

The idea of “command” over property is more complex than appears on the surface (for a detailed discussion, see Agarwal 1994). First, it takes us away from the narrow legalistic way in which many think of property rights. Command over property implies not merely rights in law, but effective rights in practice. Equality in legal rights to own property need not guarantee equality in actual ownership. This is especially true of inheritance where the gap between law and practice can be vast.

In India, for example, legally women enjoy significant inheritance rights, even if unequal to men’s (Agarwal 1994). In practice, only a small percentage of women inherit. A sample survey of rural widows in 1991, by development sociologist Martha Chen, found that only 13% of the surveyed women with landowning fathers inherited any land as daughters. And only 51% of widows whose deceased husbands owned land, inherited any. Thus 87% of daughters and 49% of widows with legal claims did not inherit (cited in Agarwal 1998).

Second, property advantage can arise not only from ownership but also from effective control over it. Ownership alone does not always guarantee control. In many countries, even when women inherit they do not fully control what they receive. Some obstacles are social. For example, some cultures restrict women’s interactions in the public sphere and hence their ability to manage their property effectively. Other barriers can be legal. For instance, in Sri Lanka’s Jaffna Province, a married Tamil woman, under local law, needs her husband’s permission to lease out or sell her own property. Similar laws prevailed earlier in parts of Europe. The distinctions between law and practice, and between ownership and control are thus especially critical for women.

Third, property advantage can stem not only from private property but also public property. For instance, in most societies today, control over wealth-generating public property is largely in male hands, be they managers in large corporations, or heads of government
Four, men (as a gender, even if not all men as individuals) also largely control the instruments through which existing property advantages get perpetuated, such as institutions that enact and implement property laws (e.g. Parliaments and law courts) and the mechanisms of recruitment into bodies which control property.

Fifth, command over property can also significantly influence the institutions that shape ideas about gender, such as the media, and educational and religious bodies. Predominantly male control over these institutions can thus affect the persistence of negative ideological assumptions about women’s needs, work roles, capabilities, and so on.

Seen in this broad way, gender inequality in command over property is thus important globally, in both developing and developed countries. However, which form of property is important can differ by context, and in large parts of the developing world, arable land has a pre-eminent position, as outlined below.

(b) The importance of land

In largely agrarian economies, arable land is the most valued form of property. It is wealth creating, livelihood sustaining and status enhancing. For most rural households it provides security against poverty. Traditionally, it has been the basis of political power and social status. For many, it is even linked with personal identity and rootedness. And it has a permanence that few other assets possess. That is why people often end up spending more on litigation over ancestral land than its economic value would justify. It is notable that even in parts of central Europe today, as urban labour markets stagnate, people are returning to land and rural livelihoods for survival, as recent work on Uzbekistan shows (see Kandiyoti 2003).

While the links between access to land, economic well being and social status are well recognized at the household level, their importance specifically for women has largely been neglected in both research and policy. The United Nations has long claimed that women own only 1% of the world’s property, but they provide no data to back this claim. In fact, in most countries, large-scale surveys do not collect gender-disaggregated data for land or other assets. (Nepal is a recent exception where such data are now being collected in their census.) Hence in order to estimate women’s access to land we still have to depend mostly on small-scale surveys or village-level studies. These sources show, as noted, that few women own arable land and even fewer effectively control some. Why is this the case?

First of all, there are the noted biases in inheritance. Second, even government transfers of public land instead of narrowing the gender gap in private property tend to widen it, by transferring titles almost solely to men. This is true not only in India but in many other countries. In the Latin American agrarian reforms of the 1960s to the 1980s, for instance, less than 15% of the beneficiaries across eight countries were women. Recent shifts toward joint titling remain regionally uneven (Deere and de Leon 2001).

In China, again, although the law promises gender equality in use rights in the distribution of household responsibility land, in practice, a range of gender inequalities can emerge. For instance, since most women leave their village on marriage, and land re-adjustments are infrequent, many have to wait long periods for land to be allotted for them in their husband’s village. They also face special problems on divorce or widowhood (see e.g. Li 1999). These problems could get compounded following the 1998 Land Management Law (LML) which has restricted readjustments by extending the duration of the household responsibility contract from 15 to 30 years (Li 2003; Brown 2003). According to Li (2003: 4), figures derived from a survey undertaken by the All-China Women’s Federation and the State Statistics Bureau of 2000, showed that 70% of people without their own land were women, and among these women, 20% had never held land, while the others had lost their land on marriage, divorce, or reallocation. It is as yet unclear to what extent the 2003 Rural Land Contracting Law (RLCL) can redress these gender inequalities.  

2 For instance, on the one hand the RLCL further limits the practice of land readjustments, especially on account of population change. On the other hand, under this law, a collective cannot reassign land that is allotted to a woman if she later marries out of the village, unless the collective in her
Studies also show that typically officials get the husband to sign the contract for the family’s land use allotments (Li 1999), embodying the assumptions of the unitary household.

The third source of land is potentially through the market. But in many countries rural land markets are limited, and, in any case, given women’s fewer financial resources, their access to land either by purchase or lease is substantially more restricted than men’s. Support from the State or from NGOs can enhance this access, say, through the provision of subsidized credit to groups of women, but only to a limited extent.

(c) Implications of women’s unequal access to land

The social and economic implications of this gender inequality can be wide-ranging. Millions of women in Asia, Africa and Latin America depend critically on land for a livelihood. The process of agrarian change under which labour shifts from agriculture to non-agriculture has been slow and gender-biased. In many countries, more men than women have moved to non-farm jobs. Hence, a disproportionate number of those left dependent on land are women. In India today, relative to 53% of male workers 75% of female workers are in agriculture. And the gender gap is growing (Agarwal 2003).

As more men shift to non-farm work, de facto female-headed households will also grow: estimates for India and Bangladesh already range between 20% and 35%. Many of these women bear growing responsibilities for running the farm, but can be seriously constrained by inadequate land rights.

Indeed a lack of effective land rights affects both welfare and productive efficiency. This is discussed in depth in my land rights book and recent papers (e.g. Agarwal 1994; 2003), so I will only touch on some aspects here.

(i) Welfare: Consider first, the welfare effects. These can be both direct and indirect. There is ample evidence that a household’s property status does not automatically define the well being of all its members. First, there is persistent gender inequality in the distribution of gains from household resources. In South Asia, this impinges even on allocations for food and health care. Land solely in men’s hands therefore does not guarantee female welfare.

Women without their own land also face high risks of poverty in case of desertion, divorce or widowhood. In parts of South Asia often widows deprived of their property shares by family members are found doing wage labour on the farms of well-off brothers or brothers-in-law. In Bangladesh, widows living as dependents of male relatives are found to face much greater mortality risks than those heading their own households, and presumably owning some independent assets.

In China, similarly, in practice (even if not in law) divorced women tend to lose their land allotments in their husbands’ villages and may not easily get land allotted for them in their parental village when they return there, leaving them effectively landless and poverty prone. This is especially likely following the above mentioned 1998 Land Management Law which restricts the frequency and scope of land readjustments. This is likely to have negative implications for women marrying into another village or returning to their birth villages on divorce or widowhood (Brown 2003; Li 2003).

Hence, in most countries, to the extent that women, even of propertied households, own no property themselves, their class position remains vicarious: a well-placed marriage can raise it, divorce or widowhood can lower it. Direct land access would provide a more certain means of welfare improvement and poverty reduction.

Second, land access would increase women’s entitlement to family welfare. For elderly women, owning land can improve support from kin. As many elderly people say in India: “without property children do not look after their parents well” (Caldwell, et. al 1988:191).
Third, land access has interlinked livelihood effects. For instance, it can improve credit and employment access. In South Asia, those with land are more likely to obtain credit and put it to viable use. In rural labour markets those with land are found more likely to get employment and higher wages. Also even a small plot is found to be a critical element in a diversified livelihood system. It can be used not just for crops, but also to grow trees for fruit or fuelwood, or fodder for animals, or to set up a vegetable garden or a micro-enterprise. The landed are found to get much better returns than the landless, even in rural non-farm activity.

Fourth, assets in women’s hands can have inter-generational benefits. For a start, women are found to spend a much larger part of their earnings on family needs than men (Dwyer and Bruce 1989). Several studies also show a positive link between children’s welfare and the mother’s assets. In Brazil, the effect on child survival probabilities was found to be almost 20 times greater when asset income accrued to the mother than when it accrued to the father (Thomas 1990). In rural India, children were found more likely to attend school and get medical care if the mother had assets (Duraiswamy and Duraiswamy 1991; 1992). On children’s education, similar results obtain for Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ethiopia (Quisumbing 2003). It is no coincidence that in South Asia the best social indicators on health, education and fertility are found in Kerala in India and Sri Lanka in general - regions where women historically enjoyed notable rights in land and other property.

(ii) Efficiency: Welfare apart, in several contexts there can be efficiency gains from gender equal land access for several reasons. First there is the issue of incentives. These are found to matter not only at the household level but also at the intra-household level. In Kenya, for instance, the introduction of new weeding technology was found to raise crop yields on women’s plots by 56% - plots from which women controlled the output, but it raised yields only by 15% on the men’s plots where too women weeded but men got the proceeds (Elson 1995). Second, there can be gender differences in preferences and efficiency of land use. In Burkina Faso, due to their choice of cropping patterns, women achieved much higher values of output per hectare on their own plots than did their husbands on theirs (Udry et al. 1999). Similar research is needed in other regions.

(iii) Empowerment: Last but not least, land is found to empower women socially. It adds to their voice, their sense of identity, and their self-confidence. This is perhaps most graphically revealed in the voices of women themselves. In the 1970s Bodhgaya movement in Bihar, when landless women in two villages received land for the first time, after an extended land struggle in which they and their households had participated, they movingly recounted how having land of their own had given them the strength to speak and walk (Alaka and Chetna 1987). Women in China responded in similar ways when the Agrarian Reform law of 1947 gave them separate land deeds for the first time, as described by William Hinton (1972) in his book Fanshen (see also Croll 1978).

Also, in our study based on a sample of some 500 households in Kerala, a colleague and I found a dramatically lower incidence of marital violence where the woman owned land or a house than where she owned neither (Agarwal and Panda 2003).

Indeed in mainly agrarian economies there are many pointers that enhancing women’s land access would help improve not just equity but also family welfare, production efficiency, and women’s bargaining power and sense of empowerment.

Having said this, however, I need to emphasize four points. One, there is scope for more empirical analysis in different regions of the world on the welfare and efficiency links of women’s property status. For instance, are the links between women’s land access and incentives noted in Kenya also found in Asia or Latin America, where the pattern of family based farming is different? Are the links between the mother’s assets and child survival found in Brazil as important in Africa or Asia? Does women’s ownership of property serve as a deterrent to domestic violence in other regions as well? Two, although for illustration I have focused on land, my general purpose is to highlight the importance of property as such. In other contexts, a house may be as critical for women’s economic and social security. Three, ownership confers only one form of right, but use rights or rights of control are also important. Indeed in public property, what matters is not ownership but managerial control - the ability to make rules, be it
for government run enterprises or the management of local common pool resources, such as forests.

Four, it appears imperative that countries formulating new property laws do not repeat old biases. In post-apartheid South Africa, in Central Asia, in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in China, scholars are already expressing concern about the creation of new gender inequalities in land and other assets (see e.g. Walker 2003, Kandiyoti 2003, Verdery 1996, Li, 2003). To move toward such equality often requires taking into account the social context within which the laws will be implemented, since many laws which might in principle be gender-neutral can become unequal due to pre-existing social biases.

Social Perceptions

The second form of gender inequality I will explore today is ideological, as embedded in social perceptions and social norms. Although difficult to quantify and often hidden, these inequalities can affect economic outcomes for women in virtually every sphere, be it property rights, employment, or intra-household allocations. And they remain understudied and under-theorized.

First consider perceptions. There can be, and often is, a divergence between what a person actually contributes, needs, or is able to do, and perceptions about her contributions, needs, or abilities. In particular, a person’s contributions and needs may be undervalued because of her gender or race, or both. This affects outcomes in the market, the family, the community and the State (for elaboration see Agarwal 1997).

In the labour market, for instance, gender, like race, often defines perceptions about abilities. The work women do is often labeled as “unskilled” and that which men do as “skilled”, even if the tasks require equal skill. Or women are perceived as having lesser ability or commitment; or as being supplementary earners and men as being the breadwinners. Such assumptions often underlie discriminatory hiring and pay practices. Women on account of their gender may thus be paid less than men with the same abilities, for the same tasks.

Perceptions also guide intra-family allocations. For example, who gets what is often justified by referring to a person’s contributions or needs. But a person’s contributions may be undervalued because of gender, or because the work is less “visible”. Home based or unwaged work done mostly by women is often less valued than work which is more “visible” in physical or monetary terms.

Female members would thus receive less than males because their contributions to the household are perceived as being less — what Amartya Sen terms “perceived contribution response” (Sen 1990). Equally, women and girls may receive less because they are seen as needing less — what I term “perceived need response” (Agarwal 1997). Systematic undervaluation of women’s contributions or needs in systems where these are important distributive principles can thus reinforce gender-related deprivation. And such undervaluation is not confined to developing countries. Research on American households indicates that women doing paid work have more bargaining power than housewives, because housework is culturally devalued (England and Kilbourne 1990). Indeed, the Western feminist debate on “wages for housework” arose from the recognition that unwaged work was “invisible” and thus perceived as having little value.

Perceptions similarly influence community responses, and can hinder women’s participation in collective activity. For instance, in my current research on forest management in the villages of India and Nepal, men typically exclude women from decision-making because they perceive them as making little contribution. Some characteristic responses are: “Women can’t make any helpful suggestions.” Or, “women are illiterate. If they come to meetings, we men might as well stay at home…” I found that often the men who said this were themselves illiterate. Hence their response clearly had more to do with their perceptions about gender differences in abilities rather than with actual differences in abilities.

The government’s public policy is similarly affected by perceptions. For instance, that governments transfer land almost solely to men, even when women are significant farmers, has much to do with perceptions about, rather than the universal fact of male responsibility and female dependency. Similarly, perceptions can make
women’s public presence invisible. For instance, in patrilineal Meghalaya, when I asked officials why even in this society where traditionally women had property claims, they did not allot land to women, I was told: “Women can’t come to our office to fill out papers.” Yet outside their windows numerous women traders were selling their wares!

Indeed perceptions underlie many assumptions in economic analysis and policy. They both constitute gender inequality in ideational terms and can lead to gender unequal material outcomes.

Social Norms

Like perceptions, gendered social norms embody an important form of ideological inequality. Conventionally few economists explicitly recognized the importance of social norms. Recent literature on social capital emphasizes the positive side of social norms. Social norms are seen to reduce transaction costs and enhance economic efficiency.

But are all social norms good? Not at all. Many social norms can also have a “dark” side, especially for women. Such norms enter almost every sphere of activity both within and outside the home. Within the home, norms define the gender division of labour and goods. For instance, everywhere norms define housework and childcare as mainly women’s work, and in many rural areas this is also the case for firewood collection and cattle care. Hence, firewood or fodder shortages adversely affect women more than men. Domestic responsibilities also undermine women’s ability to participate in public decision-making, which may involve lengthy meetings at inconvenient times. Hence a common response by rural women is that they don’t have time to sit around for several hours in a meeting in the middle of the day.

Again, in north India, norms determine that males should eat before females and/or get more and better quality food. This makes for gender differences in nourishment and growth (Agarwal 1994). This is also the case in parts of China. For instance, Elizabeth Croll in her recent book, *Endangered daughters*, quotes a young girl as saying: “My mom, no matter what happened, always considered my elder brother first and ignored me. At the table, she kept putting food into my brother’s bowl and not mine, as if I were not her own child” (Croll 2004: 145).

Social norms can similarly discourage women from asserting their rights, including in property. For instance, in northwest India social norms often dictate that a “good” sister should forfeit her claim in parental property in favour of her brother.

Outside the household again, social norms restrict women’s earning options by discouraging (or even preventing) them from working outside the home, limiting the range of tasks they may perform, placing double burdens of work on them, institutionalizing lower wages for them, and so on. For instance, in many societies, norms restrict women’s mobility and public interaction. In northern South Asia women of “good character” are expected to avoid village spaces where men congregate. Hence while male farmers can sit in teashops and strike deals with other men for hiring labour or selling their crop, women farmers cannot do the same (Agarwal 1994). Similarly, a fear of reputation loss or reprimand from families makes women uncomfortable going to public meetings, unless men invite them. As a group of women in north India told Britt (1993: 148): “The meetings are considered for men only. Women are never called” (see also Agarwal 2001).

Social norms also govern female behaviour. This can range from high female seclusion to more subtle gendering, such as the expectation in many societies that women will be soft spoken and less visible. Women fish traders in parts of south India, if found haggling loudly, risk being dubbed as “masculine” and losing social status. Women in public meetings often sit on one side or at the back of the meeting space where they are less visible and audible, making them less effective in public forums. Again, in most societies, norms dictate that women rather than men relocate on marriage or job shifts. In both India and China it is the woman who is usually expected to leave her natal home and go to the husband’s village or home after marriage.

Basically gendered social perceptions and social norms embody inequalities which are hidden, sometimes difficult to name, often impossible to quantify. Yet they centrally affect material outcomes.
for women, impinging both on their employment status and their property status.

**Emergent Inequalities:**

**Community Forestry**

Gender Inequalities in property endowments, norms and perceptions form the bedrock of pre-existing material and ideological disadvantage. And their persistence can create new inequalities. Consider examples from my current research on community forestry and collective action in India and Nepal, where I have done detailed fieldwork (see, Agarwal 2000; 2001).

Forests and commons have always been important sources of basic needs such as fuelwood, fodder and other items for rural households. But because women often lack private property resources such as land and since social norms make firewood and fodder gathering mainly women’s responsibility, their dependence on the commons is greater than that of men.

Traditionally rights in local forests were based on village citizenship. Access to these communal resources thus mitigated, to some degree, inequalities in private property. However, to reduce deforestation, today governments in many countries (including developed ones such as the Scandinavian countries and Canada) are involving communities in local forest management. Certainly, across South Asia today, community forestry groups (CFGs) are mushrooming. Most are state-initiated under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme launched in 1990, in which government and villagers share the costs and benefits from protection. There are over 64,000 JFM groups in India alone, in addition to self-initiated groups.

The JFM groups have a two-tier management structure: a general body (GB) which can draw members from the whole village and an executive committee (EC) of 9-15 persons. Both bodies, interactively, define the rules for forest use, the punishments for abuse, and the methods of protection and benefit distribution. Who has a voice in the GB and EC bears centrally on who gains or loses from these initiatives.

These groups were based on modern ideas of cooperation and participation and are meant to include all villagers, but effectively many have excluded significant sections such as women from their decision-making and main benefit sharing. For instance, in many Indian states the criteria for GB membership is one person per household. Although technically gender neutral, it is usually men alone who join, since they are seen as the household heads.

But even where women can become members, few attend meetings or speak up at them, due to restrictive social norms and perceptions. Some women’s groups explained this to me as follows (see, Agarwal 2001):

“Men don’t listen. They feel they should be the spokespersons”.

“When we open our mouths, men shout us down.”

Or take a male response: “I am a man, I attend the meeting. If I am prepared to make the female members of my family act according to what I say, why should they attend the meeting?”

These “participatory exclusions” as I term them, that is, exclusions within seeming participative institutions, have other negative consequences. Without women’s participation, the rules framed for forest use tend to take little account of their concerns. Typically CFGs ban forest entry. This affects women more than men. Men mostly use the forest for small timber for agricultural implements or house building – both are sporadic needs, and purchase is also an option. Women need the forests almost daily for firewood and fodder, and for most women firewood purchase is not an option both because they have limited control over cash, and because firewood is not easily available for purchase in the rural areas. Hence women are the worst affected by the ban on entry.

In some regions women who before forest closure spent 1-2 hours for a headload of firewood ended up spending 4-5 hours after closure, and journeys of half a kilometer grew to 8-9 kilometers (Sarin 1995). And although over time the forests have regenerated, the strict bans on extractions often continue. Firewood extractions are sometimes as low as 10-15% of sustainable limits (Agarwal 2002). Hence even several years into protection, firewood shortages persist.
in most cases. Paradoxically, as some poor women in one Indian village told me: “Earlier too there was a shortage but not as acute”.

Most women have switched in varying degrees to using crop waste and some even use weeds as cooking fuel. These firewood substitutes take more time to ignite and keep alight, thus increasing cooking time. They also seriously increase smoke-related health risks, both for women and for infants playing in smoky kitchens.

Benefits from the regenerated resource are, however, largely male controlled. To begin with, any cash generated typically goes into a community fund controlled by men and mostly used for purposes from which women do not usually benefit, such as for purchasing rugs, drums or community utensils which the men use or lease out, or for travel to other villages, etc. Where benefits are distributed in cash or kind, entitlements are linked to membership and often also to contribution to protection. Thus non-member households, that are mostly the poor, are excluded, with the exclusion especially affecting poor women. Also, implicitly embodying the assumptions of a unitary household, benefit shares are on a household basis, so even if both spouses are members they get only one share.

Inequities arise too from the distributive principles followed. Distribution can be market determined (willingness to pay) or by contribution or need. While seemingly neutral, these principles have notable gender (and class) bias since people differ in their ability to pay or to contribute, or in their needs. In practice, distribution is usually by contribution and sometimes by sale. Sales adversely affect women more than men, since women have fewer financial means. But even distribution by contribution can prove inequitable where social norms bar women from making specific types of important contributions, such as doing patrol duty.

Not surprisingly, women especially the poor, often resent the closures. Some common responses are: “What forest? ... Since the men have started protecting it, they don’t even allow us to look at it!” Or “the community forest belongs to the men, we own nothing.” The new arrangements are thus creating a system of property rights in communal land which, like existing rights in privatized land, are strongly male centered and inequitable.

Here new gender inequality is being created through male control of public property and the rules that govern its use. All the rules are gender neutral on the surface. But they become unequal when filtered through the prism of pre-existing inequalities. Hence membership by one person per household translates to one man per household. A lack of private property resources increases women’s dependence on common pool resources. Both norms and perception restrict women’s participation and voice in rule making and implementation. And much of this remains hidden, since most evaluations still deem the CFGs to be success stories of decentralized management and participative community involvement.

Reducing the Inequalities

How can the noted inequalities be reduced in both their material and ideological forms. A promising analytical framework for examining the prospects for change is that of bargaining. In terms of this framework, women’s ability to change rules, norms, perceptions and property distribution in a gender-progressive direction would depend especially on their bargaining power with the State, the community and the family, as the case may be (for a detailed discussion, see Agarwal 1997).

Traditionally economists have applied ideas about bargaining within the game-theoretic mode and with little attention to gender. Recent interest in intra-household gender dynamics has yielded some interesting formulations of bargaining models, but with little application to extra-household arenas or to qualitative factors. In my discussion, at least two types of shifts from this standard approach appear necessary: First, taking account of qualitative factors such as social norms and perceptions which have particular gender implications. Second, extending the framework to include non-household non-market arenas, such as the State and community. Both extensions need a less restrictive formulation than that of a formal game-theoretic model. Here it is useful to distinguish between a bargaining approach and formal models. A bargaining approach that is not constrained by the structure that formal modeling requires would allow us to more freely apply concepts such as bargaining power to new arenas; and also allow us a freer engagement with qualitative factors.
In the present discussion, applying the bargaining approach to interactions within three major arenas - the State, the community and the family – is especially relevant. It is relevant whether we are concerned with land rights, or changing social norms, or with community forestry. Consider community forestry by way of illustration.

Some CFG rules, such as eligibility to GB membership are made at the State level, others that relate to forest closure are made at the community level. And social norms, perceptions, and property endowments are constituted in all three arenas. What would affect women’s ability to bargain effectively in these arenas? A key element would clearly be women’s own attitude to seeking change, as discussed below.

(a) Women’s attitudes or socio-economic constraints?

One influential view has been that a notable barrier to improving women’s situation can be their lack of perception of self-interest. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, for instance, has argued that one reason for persistent gender inequality in intrafamily allocations in traditional societies is women’s lack of perception of self-interest, or what he terms false perception and Marxists term false consciousness. He notes: “...acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice” (Sen 1990: 126).

But the question is, how can one tell? Observationally, it is difficult to infer from people’s overt behavior whether they are conforming to an unequal order because they accept its legitimacy, or out of fear, or because they lack other options. Empirical work which probes women’s covert responses, suggests that a lack of options is especially relevant.

There are numerous examples of women’s “everyday resistance” to intra-household inequalities. In Bangladesh, a number of studies have found many instances of rural women secretly trying to earn some cash by selling small amounts of rice without their husband’s knowledge (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982). In Nepal rural women have been found treating themselves to their favorite dishes by cooking secret meals in the woods when fetching firewood, etc. (Enslin 1990). Even American housewives in the early twentieth century were found to pad bills to get extra cash (Zelizer 1994). Everywhere women complain about their double work burden. Consider what some landless Indian women had to say. I quote (cited in Sharma 1980: 207):

“We women stay at home and do back-breaking work even if we are ill or pregnant. There is no sick leave for us. But we do not have any money of our own and when the men come home we have to cast our eyes down and bow our heads.”

Here the overt appearance of compliance (“cast our eyes down”) does not mean women lack a perception of their best interest. Rather, it reflects a survival strategy stemming from constraints on their ability to overtly pursue those interests (“we do not have any money of our own”). Compliance should not be read as implying complicity.

The policy emphasis here should thus be less on making women realize they deserve better, and more on providing options that would help them do better. Women’s noted resistance to inequality is often individual and covert. And there are inherent limitations to the effectiveness of covert resistance. To be effective agents of change often requires that women overtly challenge the formal structures that disempower them.

This returns us centrally to the question: how do we enhance women’s bargaining power in different arenas – the family, the community and the state?

(b) Enhancing women’s bargaining power

As I have discussed at length, both in a theoretical paper and in other work, the determinants of women’s bargaining power could vary by context and could include their command over economic resources, support from external agents such as the State and NGOs, and enabling social norms and social perceptions (Agarwal 1997; 2001). But at least two factors appear especially important for all three arenas and for different contexts: external agent support and
women’s group strength. For illustration, again consider community forestry.

Community forestry experience indicates that pressure from external agents such as NGOs, donors and key individuals can prove significant in changing the initial rules of entry at the state level. For example, several states in India have now made their membership rules more gender inclusive, say by instituting that one man and one woman should be members of the GB, rather than only one person per household. Here village women did not need to bargain explicitly for change. External agent support and the larger women’s movement gave village women implicit bargaining power vis-à-vis the State (Agarwal 2001).

However, bargaining with the community, for ensuring that women have more voice in CFG forums, is more difficult. Here again external agent support can help to some extent. For instance, some NGOs have used their bargaining power on women’s behalf to insist that meetings would be held only if men invited the women. Women on being so invited, often turn up in strength. Not all regions, however, have external agents committed to gender equity. A larger and sustained impact needs women’s own input.

Ground experience suggests that for women to have more voice in mixed forums and for them to challenge restrictive social norms, they would need, for a start: (i) a critical mass of vocal women, and (ii) a sense of group identity.

In many villages the women I interviewed stressed: “without a good majority of women present it is impossible to express opinions”. The importance of a critical mass has also been noted in the western context. A study of Scandinavian women politicians found that as women became a significant percentage (say 30% or more) in Parliament or local councils, there was less stereotyping and open exclusion by men, a less aggressive tone in discussions, a greater accommodation of family obligations in scheduling meetings, and more weight given to women’s policy concerns (Dahlerup 1988).

However, in South Asia, an additional step appears necessary, namely building women’s self-confidence in public interactions and increasing their sense of group identity. One way by which this is being attempted in India is by women’s credit and self-help groups. Such groups are found to enhance women’s self-confidence and collective identity. They also tend to improve male perceptions about women’s capabilities and weaken restrictive social norms. The following responses from women I interviewed are fairly typical: “Initially men objected to our going to meetings. But our women’s group helped men understand better. When we women became united in the women’s group, men saw we were doing good work. That also helped.”

These factors also help in bargaining within the family. Again I quote from my interviews with rural women in India:

“There were one or two men who objected to their wives attending our meetings…. But when our women’s association came to their aid, the men let their wives go.”

“My husband feels I contribute financially, take up employment, obtain credit for the home. This increases his respect for me.”

In fact, these experiences are common to many women’s groups across South Asia, namely that women’s collective strength and visible contributions, along with external agent support, can change at least some norms and perceptions. Of course dilemmas persist. Many separate women’s groups remain unintegrated into mixed groups, and unable to change the gender dynamics of the latter. Also certain norms, such as the gender division of domestic work, and gender inequalities in property, are more difficult to alter. To have an impact on them, a deeper structural change would be needed.

Concluding Remarks

Gender inequality takes both material and ideological forms. A critical neglected dimension of the material form is embedded in who commands public and private property, especially land. A critical hidden dimension of the ideological form are social norms and perceptions. The interactive effects of these gender disadvantages can lead to new inequality creation.

Of course which type of property is central, or the specific nature of norms and perceptions, can vary by country and culture. But the
fact of their importance everywhere is indisputable, as is the need to enhance women’s bargaining power through collective action, for mitigating such inequalities. In academic terms, understanding how such collective action among women and among progressive groups can emerge and sustain is, I believe, a challenge both for gender economics and for the social sciences more generally. In political terms, there is a challenge here for forging new strategic alliances.

This returns us full circle to Malcolm Adiseshiah. Forging alliances was a project he undertook with great success for almost fifty years, first at UNESCO and then in India. And in a globalizing world, today perhaps more than at any other time, it is a project that needs to be carried forward with renewed vigor.

REFERENCES


GENDER INEQUALITIES


