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The effect of patriarchal norms on women farmers when men migrate: a case study from West Bengal, India

Patrick Kilby[†*], Raktima Mukhopadhyay[◇] & Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt[‡]

[†]*Senior Lecturer for the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) Program at the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Banks Building Daley Rd, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*
[◇]*Executive Director of the Indian Institute of Bio-Social Research And Development (IBRAD), Prafulla Kanan, Kestopur (JL-17), VIP Road, Kolkata, India*
[‡]*Senior Fellow with the Resource Management at the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, JG Crawford Building, 132 Lennox Crossing, Canberra, Australia.*

[*]Corresponding author. E-mail: patrick.kilby@anu.edu.au

Seasonal migration of men is a global trend, with the women left on the family farms with the responsibility of managing their household and smallholder farm plots. This paper argues that the patriarchal process and government policies prevent women to maximize the productivity of the marginal plots of land they manage in the absence of their menfolk. It is the patriarchal nature of local social structures and agrarian services, such as extension and infrastructure such as water supply, which has led to the alienation of women farmers from mainstream agricultural services. The result is that they are not able to take full advantage of the productivity of their small plots of land and market any surplus. This paper concludes that there should be more targeted policies for women in agriculture.

Keywords: India, Patriarchy, Women, Agriculture, Small Holder Production

Introduction

Migration of rural men in search of a better livelihood which is mostly seasonal and circulatory is a global trend. The women are left at home on the small marginal farms having the responsibility to manage their households and smallholder farm plots (Peng, Tang and Zou 2009, Kilby 2019). This migration is due to the marginal nature of small-scale peasant agriculture and the higher returns that men obtain by both short term and longer-term migration. While this migration can lead to greater opportunities for women in terms of expanded choices and diversifying household income, there are barriers as well which this paper will explore.

This paper argues that it is strong patriarchal values and behaviors in the domestic sphere, as well as in government policy that impedes women in their new-found roles and responsibilities. These processes are examined through a case study of *Adivasi* women in Bankura District in West Bengal in India who support their migrating husbands, who are still seen as the main 'breadwinner', rather than the women being treated as smallholder farmers in their own right. This alienation of women is as a result of patriarchal processes. Hearn (2015) argues that patriarchy in the transnational context of men's gender domination in global institutions is through 'hegemonic masculinity' and the 'domination of common sense' (p.13). It is his observations about globalization, the nation state, nationalism, and even organized labor and how these factors affect and are affected by local actors, where his notion of 'transpatriarchies' has relevance to this Indian case. This paper uses a case study from West Bengal India to argue that these same gendered processes occur at a local level. Part of this is what Sarah Llongwe (1997) refers to as 'gender policy evaporation', whereby these broader patriarchal structures result in even the most progressive national gender policies simply 'evaporating' and disappearing when it comes to putting them into practice (p.149). Gender policies in international aid and development, and agricultural research have suffered this fate since the 1960s (Kilby 2015, 2019).

These policies build on local patriarchal traditions, to ensure the exclusion of women smallholder producers in their everyday production exchanges, including those with the state. The result is that not only are women excluded but the broader community suffers from lower productivity of small holder plots. This is, in addition to relatively low levels of remittances, as a result of what Cole et al. (2015) call the " masculinization of spending", whereby male spending focusses on their own consumption, not that of the family.

This paper focuses on how these patriarchal processes that structure economies and household relations, can constrain

women in their livelihood choices and limit their opportunities that can occur when men migrate.. It concludes that more targeted policies for women in agriculture can enable more gender equal outcomes and recognize women's important contribution to small holder production.

Women in Agriculture

While the critical role of women in agriculture has been recognized since the 1960s and before, it was Boserup's work in Africa in the late 1960s, and the First Women's conference in Mexico City in 1975 that brought the idea of women as farmers to the fore (Boserup 1970; Quataert 2013). However, since the 1960s there has been little substantial change to the fundamental gendered nature of agricultural production, with women doing the lower paid more manual tasks, while men generally undertake tasks that require the use of some technology such as the use of tractors or mechanical threshers (Dixon 1982; Fraser and Tinker 2004; Boserup 1970; Mead 1976; Rao 2012; Kilby 2019). Through the 1980s these 'technological advances' served to alienate women farmers further (Agarwal 1986; Ramamurthy 1997; Goonatilake 1985). Kandiyoti argued that 'classic patriarchy' in many, if not most, societies is the driver of this alienation (Hapke 2013; Kandiyoti 1988). It is based on the existing traditions of male authority, and that technological change is the domain of men (Hapke 2013). In this paper we argue that this still process of marginalization continues in the 2010s, and that even though there are now more women farmers, they still miss out on the benefits of technological change, and the associated government support systems.

These support systems such as agricultural research and agricultural extension services enable the technological change to happen, however, they are still controlled by and directed to men, with agriculture being seen as a man's domain and ignore the increased role women have in agricultural production (Kilby 2019; Theriault, Smale and Haider 2017). Men leaving their small, and often marginal agricultural plots to seek greater returns for their labour off-farm has been around since the 1980s but has accelerated in recent years (Kilby 2019). This has resulted in women taking over the main agricultural work on these plots, but with little government support (Ragasa et al. 2013, Ragasa 2014; Peterman, Julia Behrman and Quisumbing 2011; Lastarria-Cornhiel 2008). This lack of government support is patriarchal. Changes to production systems, tend to keep them in a subservient position rather than benefit women as they are still dependent on male patronage for support, and further entrenches asymmetrical gender relations (Hapke 2013; Moghadam 1992; Drolet 2010). Due to the marginal economic viability of small-scale agriculture that is now more dependent on women's labor as part of broader household management strategies of diversification, these farms specifically require more technical support targeted to women for them to be successful.

The reasons for this diversification away from solely on-farm production leading to men's migration, are largely to do with the economics of larger capital-intensive farming over small scale semi-subsistence agriculture (Collier 2008; Collier and Dercon 2014), together with an urban bias in developing country food policies. Farmers receive lower prices for producing key staples such as paddy (rice), maize and wheat, leading to higher levels of rural poverty (Lipton 1977; Bezemer and Headey 2008; Mallick 2014; Jacoby 2013). Up to half of rural household incomes in developing countries are dependent on off-farm labor and associated remittances from men's migration (Arun 1999; Lastarria-Cornhiel 2008; Arun 2012; Lanjouw, Murgai, and Stern 2013).

There has also been an associated shift to women's lower paid labor for casual agricultural work on more marginal land (Arun 2012; Lastarria-Cornhiel 2008; Mahendra-Dev 2012, Srivastava and Srivastava 2010). The men who migrate either remit money back to their families or bring their savings back (in cash or kind) on their return (Mu and van de Walle 2011). This shift in household livelihood strategies for those on marginal land has major implication for the women headed households that now manage these plots.

There is an argument that the women left on these plots (and the household more broadly) are better off as a more complex livelihood strategy can be exploited by the family. The men of the household can bargain for better wages through their seasonal work, whether in urban areas or in other more commercial agricultural areas, while the women left on farms can be involved in more semi-subsistence agriculture, and be more strategic with their household management (Arun 2012; Gartaula, Visser, and Niehof 2012; Jacka 2012; Singh, Singh, and Kumar 2013). The issue is the range of patriarchal processes in place which limit women achieving their full potential as farmers.

India

In India nearly 90 percent of rural women are dependent on casual work in the agriculture sector (Agoramoorthy, Hsu, and Shieh 2012; Srivastava and Srivastava 2010). Typically, these women are involved in the low paid casual farm work in addition to tending their own small plots of land and raising their families. At the same time, women's workload is higher as the level of education and associated costs increases for their children, who in the past were engaged in farm labor instead of schooling (De Anuradha et al. 2011; Asadullah, Kambhampati, and Boo 2013; Hill and Chalaux 2011). The women are also responsible for maintaining the household's broader social relations in the community when men migrate (Jacka 2012; Locke, Seeley, and Rao 2013; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014).

An important aspect of these gendered social roles, in India is that women enter the formal work force only when they must. This challenges the neoliberal orthodoxy of households maximizing their incomes (Kabeer and Humphrey 2012). It many contexts it is only when the household income falls below a certain level an 'income effect' kicks in and women enter the work force (Das 2011, p. 103). Hapke's found that in Kerala that women's workforce participation fell as men migrated and sent remittances from the Middle East to make up most of the household income. A new set of patriarchal norms, or a 'neopatriarchy', is emerging whereby as household incomes increase women move

out of the workforce to stay at home to support the family, and with it maintain the notion of the man as the 'breadwinner' (Hapke 2013; Sharabi 1988; Kandiyoti 1988; Rao 2012).

In the case of women from poorer families, they cannot remove themselves to the same extent and so must take up casual laboring as a source of supplementary income (Sengupta 2012). However, their work is usually categorized by themselves as a 'subsidiary category' when asked in statistical surveys. That is, they do not see agriculture as their primary role. Like their wealthier counterparts, casual agricultural work becomes an extension of household maintenance, the primary role of women (Das 2011, p.94). This is because for a man, a visibly working wife '. . . would bring shame to the family and pose a threat to their identity as provider' (Rao 2012, p. 1035). The women see their role very much in traditional patriarchal terms and adapt to these norms in how they describe their changing roles.

If the unpaid agricultural labor the women undertake on their own plots is included in surveys, then women's productive work is much greater than what is generally recognized. The effect of this exclusion of women as farmers in agricultural employment surveys makes them economically invisible (Sengupta 2012, p. 59). As noted above this process is also one in which the women are themselves complicit: it is 'a process of co-performance, where men and women jointly construct women as housewives and men as providers' (Rao 2012, p. 1044). Rao argues that it is the women's intention to downplay their role in agriculture and defer to the man as the breadwinner. Given the economic changes occurring and the vulnerability they entail, there is mutual interest in playing out certain narratives. The issue, however, is that the state and others accept these narratives in how or if they support the women left on the small farm plots. As a result of this vulnerability women receive lower wages and have fewer days work available per year (Srivastava and Srivastava 2010; Dewan 2015; Ramamurthy 2014).

As the *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women represent the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the society, their options to move out of the workforce or find jobs other than low paid manual work in agriculture are limited (Arun 2012; Murthy et al. 2008; Rao 2012). *Dalits* and *Adivasis* are mainly found in the districts with poor land, fewer irrigation facilities, and where farming is less profitable. There is also a strong gender division of labor within agriculture that also affects women's roles — 'sex-sequential' agriculture (Rao 2011, p. 301). Men traditionally do the ploughing, applying fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation, threshing, stocking, and marketing, while women undertook tasks such as weeding, sowing, transplanting seedlings, fruit picking, and post-harvest management. While women take on more of the traditional men's roles after they migrate, it has been and still is a taboo for a woman to plough the land, and so they must find men to do this (Kilby 2019; Talwar and Ganguly 2003). This puts them in a vulnerable position, as the timing of ploughing has a large effect on yields (Croppenstedt, Goldstein, and Rosas 2013; Dewan 2015; Srivastava and Srivastava 2010).

The Study Area: Bankura, West Bengal

West Bengal is one of the most densely populated states in India and nearly 70 per cent of its population depend on agriculture and related activities. In Bankura District this figure is over 90 per cent (Census of India 2011). Paddy (rice) is the main crop in the state, grown in three seasons. While women are only nine per cent of the paid workforce, in the agriculture sector they make up around one third of the paid labor across the state with Bankura having double the state average of women in agriculture (Census of India 2011a). Migration is common across the District and about two thirds of families have men migrating to the neighboring districts as agricultural laborers for seasonal work at least twice a year. Women are left in the home community to take the responsibility for the cultivation of the smallholder plots, as well as working as seasonal agricultural laborers on nearby farms.

Methodology

This paper is mainly based on the experiences of the *Adivasi* women from a number of villages in Bankura District though focus group discussions. The aim of these discussions was to get a more detailed perspective from the women themselves on how change has affected them. Focus group interviews were held in Jamirdiha, Basudevpur, Jamkanali, and Bashkanali village communities in Bankura District. The groups of 10 to 15 women were interviewed in early 2015. The women in the focus groups were selected from those who were present. Most women had husbands who had migrated for varying periods of time, ranging from a few months of seasonal work to long-term migration. So, while the experiences discussed were not strictly representative, IBRAD staff who knew the District and the groups from IBRAD's broader agricultural research in watershed management, indicated that these groups were typical of the area and not unusual in any way. The focus groups were held in an open space and in a way that enabled them to speak out and elaborate on their lives. A free-flowing conversation was encouraged rather than work through a questionnaire. This positive approach to the focus group enabled a richer conversation to emerge. These interviews were not recorded but brief notes of key points were taken. This enabled a more forthright conversation. The discussion that follows is an aggregation of focus group discussion.

Change in the Social Context: Perceptions of Women in Bankura

Agricultural production

In Bankura the women interviewed in the focus group had male family members, usually spouses but also adult sons who migrated, generally to the more economically developed Hooghly District, where they worked in commercial agriculture. These men earn almost double the pay that they could be earn in Bankura. The women remaining in the community were involved in a range of occupations including tending their own small fields (usually around a quarter acre); seasonal work on nearby larger

farms as contract labor; and collecting leaves from the nearby forest and making leaf plates, which are sold to restaurants in major towns and cities across West Bengal. There was limited regular work available, and at various times through the year there was little income, except from their own plots, which they farm flexibly. For example, in 2014 the women farmers in Jamkanali and Jamirdiha villages did not get any paddy (rice) harvest due to a lack of irrigation water, so they grew mustard as an alternative as they could use the oil for cooking, and sold any surplus seed (Jamir Diha FGD). Any agricultural work nearby was limited and mainly in the October-November harvest season if the harvest is good. Other work such as brick kiln or road repair work was likewise limited (Jamir Diha FGD). At times when work was available the women typically did outside work for three days a week, and worked on their own fields for the other two days. They made leaf plates whenever there was less outside work available. These livelihoods are precarious at best.

As an example a typical focus group from Jamkanali discussed their livelihoods and their husbands' livelihoods to show the range of livelihood strategies.

Jamkanali Focus Group (twelve women)

One woman's husband is a security guard in Kolkata away for 2–3 months and then comes back for a few days. He brings money back with him. Another has a husband driver who comes back each month. Another works in a shop nearby and many work in the agriculture fields in Hoogly. All of the women are casual labourers in agriculture. They work in the November harvesting season and some post harvest work. Otherwise they sell leaf plates. They also get 10–15 days per year transplanting work.

Women receive from Rs150 per day for the heavier brick kiln work, Rs120 per day for earthwork for roads and construction when it is available, and Rs100 per day with a midday meal for agricultural work (Jamir Diha FGD, Basudevpur FGD). The men who migrate to work in commercial agriculture receive double this rate plus their accommodation and all meals. The men generally bring cash back when they return home after a couple of months of labor elsewhere. The amount they bring is quite variable, with some bringing nothing back, but Rs1,000–2,000 is typical. This money is used to pay off debts or to cover the larger expenses the family must pay, such as children's school fees. This money is less than half of what the man earns for the time he is away and with his other living expenses already paid for. The women say that much of the men's wages are spent on alcohol and gambling. This is in line with Cole et al. (2015) who argue that the feminization of poverty is actually the result of male spending on their own consumption, not that of the family. The account from Basudevpur groups highlights this point.

Basudevpur FGD (*Adivasi* women)

One woman's husband goes to paddy transplanting at Hoogly (4-5 hours away) and for potato harvest each for a month at a time, and 45 days for paddy harvest at the end of the year. The have a 1/4 acre of paddy and sesame. They sell the sesame at Rs40–50 per kg. They sell half — about 30kg. Another women husband also goes to Hoogly for ag work. He doesn't send money. Another woman's husband brings money back (1,500–2000 per trip of 1–1.5 months). The problem is that he drinks too much and when he does that he cannot work that day. Another one had a husband away for three years and sends no money. Most of the men don't send or bring back much money. The women in the group depend on the Rs2 per kg of rice they receive as welfare

When there is no work, they make leaf plates. Like Rao's case from Varansai District in Northern India where women string beads for Rs 150 a month (Rao 2012), in Bankura it is making leaf plates, which while more lucrative than stringing beads still provides a very meagre subsidiary income for the 'off-season'. The women collect the raw Sal leaves from the adjoining forest areas, and pin them into flat plates: each plate requires five to seven Sal leaves, and in a week they can make 1000 plates for which they receive Rs100–150. The plates are prepared mainly during August and September, the lean season for both agriculture and other works (Jamkanali FGD, Bashkanali FGD).

Agricultural inputs for women farmers

When men migrate, women are responsible for the farm plots, but they are vulnerable due to the lack of ownership which is a prerequisite for government support. Over half the women interviewed in Bankura said that there has been an increase in the use of inputs like fertilizers and pesticides, since they have taken charge of their small plots, following men's migration. According to the focus groups it is the dealers and local shop owners who influence the decision on use of these inputs, rather than government officials or expert extension officers. As these women lack any access to official support services, they end up paying more to buy and apply the pesticides and fertilizers, as the poor advice from sales people is leading to their over use. As a result of chemical overuse, the women report: increased input costs; reduced soil fertility; soil compaction; the loss of favorable pests; and at times contaminated food in the market. This is in line with Rahman and Zang (2018) findings.

There has been no program to specifically develop the capacities of the women cultivators (National Commission of Farmers 2007), and most existing services are limited to land owners. Interviews with the local extension officer confirmed that the demonstration days and other support services do not extend to women, and there is no program in place to reach them. The existing programs are aimed at the larger landholding male farmers. Only two women out of one hundred interviewed had attended any of these programs. It is land ownership that gives farmers access to many of these services, particularly credit.

While the law has been changed to enable joint land ownership, in practice this rarely happens, and so women remain excluded from these services.

As the ploughing of land is a taboo for women, the hire of tractors has increased as more women are left cultivating the small plots. Tractors are owned by the bigger farmers, and it is difficult for women to access them when they need to for their small plots. They tend to get access to tractors only when the larger fields have been ploughed, leaving them with a later planting and consequently lower yields (Basudevpur FGD). Garikipati (2009) argues that technologies, such as the use of farm machinery, the application and use of fertilizers and pesticides, and running irrigation pumps, are linked to the land. This is largely held and controlled by men who have access to information and training, and exposure to the outer world, to which women are effectively denied. Women thus become marginalized in the formal production process and women cultivators lose any advantage they may have had over their male counterparts.

Changing women's roles and men's migration

The changing social roles the women experienced as a result of the men' migration was mixed. One was an increased social reproduction role of women for the rest of the family, such as providing family support during childbirth. Hospital birthing staff expect 'tips' for child delivery and this is typically Rs 400 for a boy and Rs 250–300 for a girl (Jamir Diha FGD, Jamkanali FGD). The child's education was also a high priority among all women in the focus group. Earlier it was expected the children would work with their parents, none of whom went to school, but now all the children of those interviewed in focus groups went to school, and the local government through the collector provides support in the form of free bicycles for girls to go to high school.

The education of girls is given a high priority and interestingly the women reported that keeping the boys at school is more difficult than keeping girls at school, as the boys have a higher dropout rate and as one said, 'they have a fear for study' (Bashkanali FGD, Jamir Diha FGD). All the women want their children to do well and continue to college where they can qualify for professional or semi-professional jobs such as teaching. However, education is also expensive due to private tuition rackets where graduates with education degrees offer a couple of hours of private tuition each day to the children, which they argue is necessary if the child is to succeed. They charge each parent around Rs160 ($US3) per month and they have classes of five or six children (Basudevpur FGD). The absence of men and a regular income from them adds to the costs which women must cover.

Changing Roles of Women in the Agriculture Sector: Matter of Convenience or a Change in Cultural Constructs and Stereotypes?

Even under these challenging conditions discussed above, around three quarters of the women surveyed were managing their family farm plots after the migration of their husbands, with the remainder being managed either by the father-in-law or son. As mentioned above, women traditionally did not undertake roles that require management skills, bargaining capacity, and networking or interacting with the outside world, which is the domain of men reflecting the patriarchal nature of society. Virtually all the women interviewed had taken up some new activities include hiring labor, purchasing inputs, arranging irrigation, applying fertilizer and pesticide, planting, sowing, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest management, and marketing.

However, women who are categorized as cultivators still have limited ownership and control over resources such as land, livestock, farm machinery and transport equipment. They also have limited access to credit, technology and market information that are so crucial to manage their farm efficiently and profitably (Swarna and Vepa 2005; Rao 2012). The perception that 'women are not farmers' is ingrained in the local community so that it creates its own barrier and poses a challenge to women in accessing agricultural services. They are usually not identified as 'beneficiaries' to get subsidies, training, or be included in technology transfer programs. An IBRAD survey found that only two women from Bankura had attended any training program or had an extension worker to guide them on how to improve their farming practices. None of the women in the focus groups had received any extension support.

Conclusion

While there have been marked changes in the role of women of Bankura District in agriculture following the migration of their menfolk, the women still face a series of challenges that are highly gendered. The first is that control of many of the productive assets are still controlled by men limiting women access; and the second, is that most agricultural services offered by government are still aimed at men (based on land ownership) despite women being increasingly the primary cultivator and making key agricultural decisions. While the women do have expanded choices and agency in being able to have some control of their households in the absence of their menfolk it is heavily constrained. The clear gender bias in both access to resources and to extension services and training affects the productivity of their land and with that their household income.

The experience of the *Adivasi* women of Bankura supports the finding from the broader literature on patriarchy which devalues women's productive roles in a range of ways. The women from Bankura are seen as supporting their migrating husbands who are the main 'breadwinners' rather than being seen as smallholder farmers in their own right (Rao 2012). This occurs at several levels. The gendered power relations in the household means that the husband relinquishes responsibility for household management. However, the funds returned to the household from his migration work is probably much less than half his earnings, even after his own living costs are covered. The high levels of domestic violence experienced by the women when the husband is at home further entrenches these unequal power relations.

At the community level the small-scale women farmers must deal with male controlled resources and less access to appropriate technology for them to make maximum use of their marginal plots. They are denied both access to and knowledge or resources, thus it is difficult for women to negotiate with the big farmers and male laborers, as well as to arrange the farm machinery and other inputs with the correct application and use. The seeming bias against the women farmers has put them in a secondary position to access these facilities and services. Tractor operators only come after the farm lands managed by the menfolk are done. At the level of the State, these women farmers are invisible, with no extension programs for them and little move to joint land ownership despite the fact that it is allowed. This is in line with literature outlined at the beginning of this paper. While Hearn's (2015) reference to transpatriarchies is about men's domination of global institutions and transnational processes, the same process happens very much at a local level. Male attitudes dominate the provision of services with the view that men are seen predominately as farmers and women are housewives. While there is an increase in women's agency by virtue of their running the household and having expanded choices, men and male attitudes dominate local institutions such as agricultural service provision even if it is at the expense of household incomes.

Women's contribution to agricultural production is seen as subsidiary to their household maintenance role. There is little evidence of pro women policies being implemented, the possible exception being girls' access to education. Women are effectively denied access to agricultural support services necessary for their small plots to be viable despite the opportunities they should have as joint owners of the land. Here any higher-level gender policy quickly 'evaporates' at implementation (Llongwe 1997) in favor of supporting the existing but often changing and adapting patriarchal structures (Rao 2012).

While changing the patriarchal inertia in terms of gender policy is difficult it is nevertheless necessary if the productivity of marginal lands is to be fully exploited. While policies are in place around joint land ownership and the like which should enable women to access extension services, this is not happening and as Llongwe (1997) says the policy simply 'evaporates'. One solution might be through incentives for those responsible for implementation such as the collector or the extension services. The effect would be that the more women involved in their extension work then this would affect their performance measures, promotions and prestige. These incentives (such as in education), are already in place for working with *Adivasis* so the next step would be to spell them out for agricultural support for *Adivasi* women, in the absence of the male 'breadwinner'.

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