

## BOOK REVIEW

Agarwal, Bina: *A FIELD OF ONE'S OWN: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

*A Field of One's Own* is a stunning book. It is the most comprehensive study, to date of the implications for women of inequality in command over property. Focusing on land, the single most important source of livelihood in rural South Asia, Agarwal demonstrates that land rights not only define the social status and political power of households, but also structure gender relations within and outside the household.

The central question driving the book is why, despite the fact that most South Asian countries adopted gender-progressive legislation regarding inheritance in the 1950s and 1960s, so few women inherit land and even fewer exercise effective control over it. To answer it, Agarwal draws upon an impressive array of sources (including several hundred doctoral dissertations and village studies by scholars in a variety of disciplines and her own extensive field research), spanning five countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka

In Chapter 1, Agarwal remarks on the striking neglect of the issue of gender and property rights by development scholars, feminists, activists and policy-makers: even those who are centrally concerned with the effects of development on women and gender relations have failed to examine women's relation to property, the special significance of land as property, the nature of land rights and the continued importance of land as rural livelihoods become more diversified. Agarwal makes the case for why women need independent rights in land - that is, independent of male ownership or control. She makes four powerful arguments, focusing on welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment considerations.

In Chapter 2 Agarwal turns to theory and demonstrates how a "bargaining power approach" can be used to analyze the process of construction and reproduction of gender relations. Here she extends the work of Amartya Sen (1983, 1990) in a number of innovative ways, which will be of interest to feminists and others concerned with modeling of the household. For example, she argues that among the factors determining rural women's fallback positions in intra-household bargaining, private land rights are even more important than access to employment. She discusses the role of social norms, as well as access to economic resources and social support, in influencing bargaining power. She also links gender differences in intra-household bargaining power to extra-household bargaining power within the community and state, demonstrating that the household, community and state are interacting arenas of contestation.

In the next two chapters she draws on the available (and, as she recognizes, spotty) historical evidence on women's traditional land

rights in South Asia, contrasting these in patrilineal, matrilineal and bilateral systems of inheritance. While these latter two systems were clearly the exception in the region, under Agarwal's powerful analytical lens it is these case studies which generate some of her most novel insights into current struggles over land rights. Whereas in the past, local custom governed both marriage and inheritance, today these are separated, with the state governing the latter and the community, the former. She finds greater conflict over women's new legal land rights in patrilineal communities which forbid close-kin marriage and village endogamy, practices which keep land within the kin group and which her historical analysis demonstrates to have been associated with previous matrilineal and bilateral systems of inheritance.

Moreover, the utility of her theoretical framework is clearly demonstrated in her analysis of the factors that made women in matrilineal and bilateral systems of inheritance particularly vulnerable to the forces of change introduced in the twentieth century: while they historically had considerable bargaining power in household relations under customary practices, they had limited access to decision-making authority within the community and state.

In Chapter 5, Agarwal recounts the process of contestation that led to the more gender progressive inheritance laws of the post-1950 period, a process that finally led most South Asian states to legally establish that women could have independent property rights in land. Nonetheless, until the 1980s, in state initiatives regarding land reform or resettlement, women (except in some cases widows) were basically ignored as potential beneficiaries. As in Latin America (deer 1985), it was assumed that "households" - that is, all household members - would be the beneficiaries of such initiatives, but land was titled only in the name of household "heads", the vast majority of whom were men.

In the next two chapters Agarwal explores two critically important issues: the multi-faceted obstacles which prevent women from claiming their legally-sanctioned inheritance shares in land, and the many constraints which women face in exercising effective control over land in those cases where they do hold property rights. Readers who are not South Asia specialists may find these chapters difficult to fully digest, given what Agarwal rightly calls the "mosaic" of inheritance and marriage practices and the multitude of practices which lead to the social construction of gender in this vast and heterogeneous region. But this sort of investigation, combining theoretical analysis that recognizes the complexity of gender relations with empirical analysis that acknowledges the diversity of social practices across communities, is precisely the type of work that must be undertaken in all regions if we are to understand and remedy the gender gap in command over property. Thus even readers who are not very familiar with South Asia will find these chapters instructive in raising questions, suggesting hypotheses and providing a model for research on other regions. In Chapter 8

Agarwal provides a helpful summary of her findings, tracing cross-regional diversities and aiding the reader with detailed tables and useful maps.

Agarwal concludes that the principal factors constraining South Asian women in exercising their land rights are the following: (a) patrilocal post marital residency and village exogamy (which, as mentioned above, would cause land inherited by a woman to fall outside the purview of her natal kin); (b) low levels of female literacy (which make it difficult for women to fight for their claims through the legal system and to successfully operate as independent farmers); (c) strong (at times, violent) opposition from male kin; (d) the social construction of gender needs and roles (including constraints on women's behavior that make it difficult both to fight for land ownership and to effectively manage land that is own); and (e) male bias at all levels of public decision-making.

While these obstacles are formidable, Agarwal also demonstrates that women in South Asia have not merely accepted their deprivation. In Chapter 9, she recounts how women have resisted gender inequities (especially, but not only, those relating to property) in a variety of ways, ranging from covert individual action to overt collective action. The most uplifting case study of gender-progressive collective action is that of the Bodhgaya peasant movement in Bihar (a patrilineal region in north-east India), initiated in 1978. This is probably the first case of women - including not only widows, but wives and unmarried daughters - obtaining independent land right through collective action; only in the 1990s has it been replicated in practice in Latin America. As Agarwal demonstrates, this historical precedent was not an easy struggle: among the factors important to its success were women's very visible contributions (acknowledged by men) to this peasant group's overall struggle over land: the solidarity among the women participants, recognizing their gender-specific interests; the involvement in the movement of middle-class women activists with a feminist perspective; and the very process of discussion, one which included women as protagonists.

In Chapter 10, which concludes the book, after an excellent summary of the main results of the study, Agarwal turns to the challenge ahead. As she has earlier illustrated, even the idea that women need independent rights in land is still an arena of struggle; and to eliminate the multiple obstacles which prevent women from claiming land or from controlling land they own will require contestation

by women at all levels - house-hold, community and state. But the struggle, she argues, is a crucial one to wage: "Indeed the very resistance encountered by women, even in their demand for legal reform, is a measure of how central landed property is in maintaining positions of privilege, including gender privilege" (p.468).

One hopes that *A Field of One's Own* will reach a very wide audience. Those whose focus is South Asia will find it a comprehensive treatment of South Asian women's relation to property, with much to say about other aspects of gender relations in the region as well. Scholars and activists in other regions of the South will find the book a rich source of ideas and a model for further research. And feminists (economists and others) whose focus is gender relations in the North will benefit from Agarwal's innovative theoretical work on the relationship between gender and property (Ch.1); the application of the bargaining framework to gender relations both within and outside the household (Ch.2); and the nature of women's individual and collective resistance to gender inequities (Ch.9).

My only frustration after reading *A Field of One's Own* is one shared by Agarwal herself: more than twenty-five years after the birth of the field of "Women and/in Development", national-level data on gender-differentiated access to land are still not collected in the vast majority of agricultural censuses. As feminist economists concerned with the issues raised in this book, our immediate agenda is fairly straightforward.

## References

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The articles on the draft Constitution by Rohan Edrisinha and Deepika Udagama that appears in our issue vol. 5 no.2 were presented at a seminar organised by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. We regret the omission of this information in that issue.