

# Political Economy of Women's Empowerment and Land Rights: Issues to Ponder Upon

## Why women?

**W**hy women? For many reasons. Firstly, women constitute half of the human population. They are also the reproducers. Second, woman is the mother of civilisation. Women have played an important role in the development of the primitive communal economy as well as the industrial revolution. How can one think about the industrial revolution in the UK without the participation of women? Or about the development of Bangladesh without women workers? About 90% of women workers [in Bangladesh] are trained.

They are "home engineers." (We no longer employ the term "housewife" in the Census). Women can perform up to 92 activities [see Table 1]. They are not only the real producers but also reproducers of the economy. They are the key persons in maintaining family bonds, directors in ensuring the family's economic survival and food security, protectors and guarantors of households, and protectors of natural resources – land, water and forestry. They – not corporate managers – are the leading experts on time management because they can carry out, on a daily

basis, so many activities.

Furthermore, women are most knowledgeable about disaster coping strategies. This is why majority of disaster training programs is done with women. Also, they are the knowledge producers as well as the innovators of local and traditional best practices.

Most importantly, they are promoters of peace at the household, community, national and international levels.

But despite all that they do, women are the most discriminated. They eat last and least. They are late to bed and early to rise. How many hours do our mothers sleep? They are the last to be hired and first to be fired. They are subject to inequality and ill-being. They are subjugated to the power of patriarchy. They are subjects of isolation, powerlessness, vulnerability, deprivation, distress, and destitution. They are the "missing population." In Bangladesh also, their contribution to economy is never recognised. Women are economically not empowered; they cannot take on an agency role. They are subject to tokenistic participation. Though they may be members in a council, their participation is not real.

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Likewise, inheritance laws are not pro-women. Women are subordinated to the concept of “good sister,” where that sister is best who gives up her land for her brother. But the reverse does not hold; no concept of “good brother” in terms of inheritance exists.

Women are key targets of various forms of violence. In conflict situations, the differential impact on women is alarming. In conflicts ranging from land litigation to war, women suffer the worst.

These depict the dire situation women find themselves in. So, why women? Given all this is true, then why not? Why not give women rights to land and other assets?

## Women’s empowerment

Women’s empowerment, including their economic empowerment, is an issue of true human and humane development. It is enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh (1972); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), Women’s Development Policy (1997); Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup> (2000), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) (2005); Vision 2021<sup>2</sup> (2008), and the ILC Kathmandu Declaration (2009). Furthermore, it is essentially about ensuring opportunities for women to have a full life. It is about extending real

<sup>1</sup> MDG 3 is “to promote gender equality and empower women.”

<sup>2</sup> This is the Election Manifesto of the present government administration in Bangladesh.

freedoms women should enjoy: political participation, economic opportunities, social facilities, transparency guarantee, and protective security. Further, it is about enabling women to find substantive freedom; about expanding their choices to live lives they value; about removing all sources of “un-freedom” to women; about respecting constitutional and justiciable rights; about inclusion of the excluded; and about breaking the deprivation trap.

## Women’s empowerment and land rights: constitutional rights

The Constitution of Bangladesh makes provisions in favour of women in at least 24 articles. For one, all citizens are regarded as equal before the law (Article 27). Article 7(1) is the most powerful article. It is the basis of the Constitution, and says, “All powers”—not “power”—“all powers belong to the people.” Are women part of “the people”? The answer is of course yes.

The Constitution declares in Article 28(2): “Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres.” Article 10 provides for the right to ensure the participation of women in all spheres. Equal opportunities are also granted in the Constitution. Further, Article 29 (2) asserts that women have the right not to be discriminated, while Article 19 (2) specifies that they are not to be discriminated on the basis of sex. Removing social and economic inequality (Article 19 [2]) and ensuring radical transformation through



agricultural revolution (Article 16) are also mentioned.

The question left hanging therefore is: why do stark inequality and discrimination in women’s ownership and access to land persist?

### Socio-economic class matters

Of course socio-economic class matters. But the question of socio-economic class is an unpleasant one. Though it is seriously discussed, not only in Bangladesh, but in almost all Third World countries, substantive, empirical data is not widely available.

The socio-economic class situation as represented in this pyramid [see Figure 1] is probably similar across various developing countries in Asia.

The pyramid can be divided into three parts. At its apex are the rich. My estimates point to 4.1 million rich, out of Bangladesh’s population of 150 million. At the bottom are the absolute poor, numbering 98.9 million – almost a hundred million. The central part corresponds to the middle class, comprising 47 million people. This part can be further subdivided into three groups: lower middle (25.4 million), middle-middle (14.6 million), and upper middle (7 million). If one adds the base of the pyramid, with the lower middle class, s/he will have almost 130 million, out of 150.

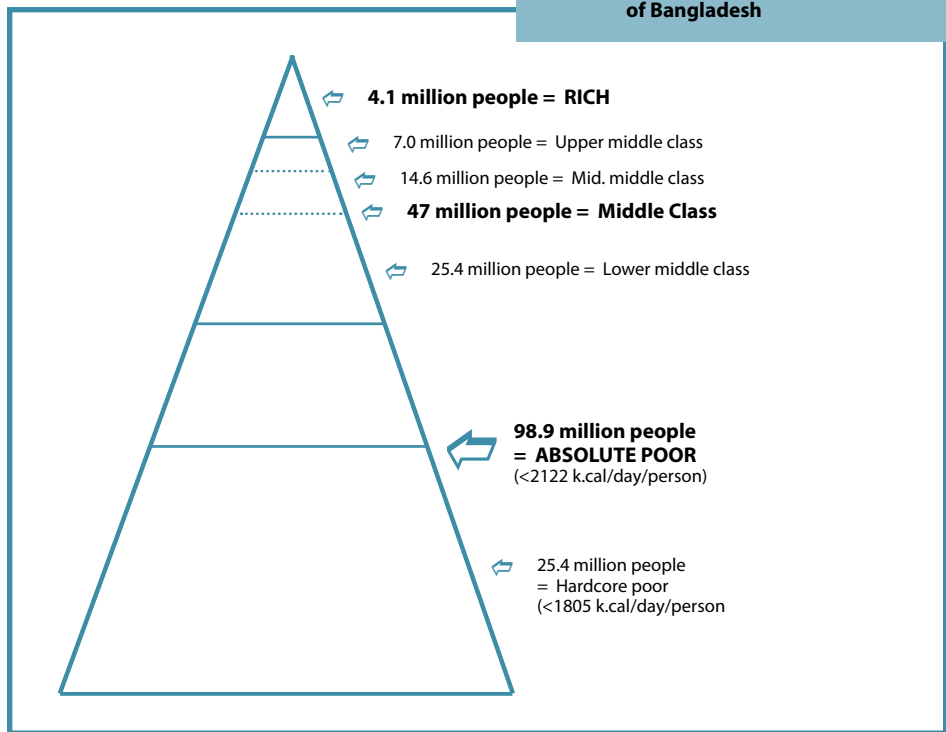
Where women are in this pyramid should also be looked into. Women are doubly poor. First, they are poor and deprived. Then, they are women.

### The economics of love<sup>3</sup>

Women’s contribution remains unrecognised. The “economics of love” pertains to the monetary value of the love economy of Bangladesh in 2008. Simply, this refers to the monetary and time value of women’s productive and household related work, which they do, according to men, out of love. [See table 1]. Indeed, women perform up to 92 different activities, but such is neither recognised nor monetised in the national accounting system. The annual time spent for household work by all women in Bangladesh amounts to an estimated 166 billion

<sup>3</sup> The “economics of love” and the estimations presented herein have already been presented by Dr. Barkat in the second biennial conference of the Bangladesh Economic Association in the Keynote presentation.

**FIGURE 1: Socio-economic class pyramid of Bangladesh**



hours. The figures are disaggregated into rural and urban areas. Instead of taking the average monetary value of work carried out by women, I have taken the monetary value for the actual work which they do. For example, if a woman devotes time for nursing her father-in-law or mother-in-law, I use the money value of an average nurse. If she works in agriculture, I use the weighted money value of that as well. The monetary value of these 166.4 billion hours, as shown in the last row, is 2,496 billion taka.<sup>4</sup> This is the monetary value of the economics of love.

Four conclusions arise. First, the officially recognised contribution of women in GDP is 20%. If the other work that women do is added to the existing GDP, GDP will increase. Women's true share in the GDP will make up 47.8%, or almost half, though this may even be an underestimate. As such, women's work has never been included in GDP accounting. For the last century, the monetary value of their work was being ignored; this is a very strong point for affirmative action for women, especially for poor and marginalised women in society.

### Understanding women's ownership and access to land

Land ownership is fundamental, being a key determinant of poverty and inequality. The reality is, household ownership of land determines: real income, food intake, expenditure (both food and non-food), literacy and access

**TABLE 1: Money value of "Love Economy" of Bangladesh, 2008 (time and money value of women's 'household' work)**

Indicators	Rural	Urban	Total
Total female population (10+yrs; in millions)	40.78	12.88	53.66
Time spent for HH work/woman/day (in hrs)	10.76	9.00	10.34
Time spent for HH work by all women/day (in billion hrs)	0.4388	0.1159	0.5547
Annual time spent for HH work by all women (in billion hrs) (Assumed 300 work days a year)	131.6	34.8	166.4
Annual money value of "Economics of Love" (in billion Taka)	1974.6	521.5	2496.1

to education, knowledge and practice of health, access to public facilities (governance and social service), and electric connectivity. It is no coincidence that land-poor households are the most excluded and deprived. And in such households, women are relatively even more deprived than the men. Changing land ownership patterns in Bangladesh indicate a trend of building landlessness and pauperisation, as well as concentration of land in the hands of a very few or increasing inequality.

Some conceptual issues need to be discussed. De facto ownership is not the same as de jure ownership. In the same vein, access does not necessarily translate to ownership, and ownership may not be real or effective ownership. To illustrate, in urban areas mostly, women's ownership in land and real estate has more to do with tax evasion than with real ownership. Women are not only merely nominal owners; they are also used by men with ill motives to make women tax evaders. And, secondly, 85% of the part owners in

<sup>4</sup> One US\$ is worth about 70 – 72 Bangladeshi taka.

Dhaka City are mothers-in-law; 40% of whom are dead. So ownership is clearly not a simple issue.

Ownership involves many things. It can be private ownership of inherited land, or private ownership of government's khas land. It could also mean cooperative ownership of khas land. It must be said that government, in the last 18 months, has claimed that more than 58,000 households have been given more than 28,000 hectares of khas land, which was a promise in the ruling party's election manifesto. In the national budget, it is clearly mentioned that during the annual development plan period or fiscal year, 25,000 households will receive 17,000 bighas of land.

Access to common property and forestry resources is important; but as important are not just land, but land-related interests, which include: tenurial arrangements, wage, land use, inheritance, marketing, subsidies, inputs, land litigations, technology, administration and management, public institutions on public land, agri-process industries, and the contribution to and share in the whole process of production-exchange-distribution –and-consumption cycle.

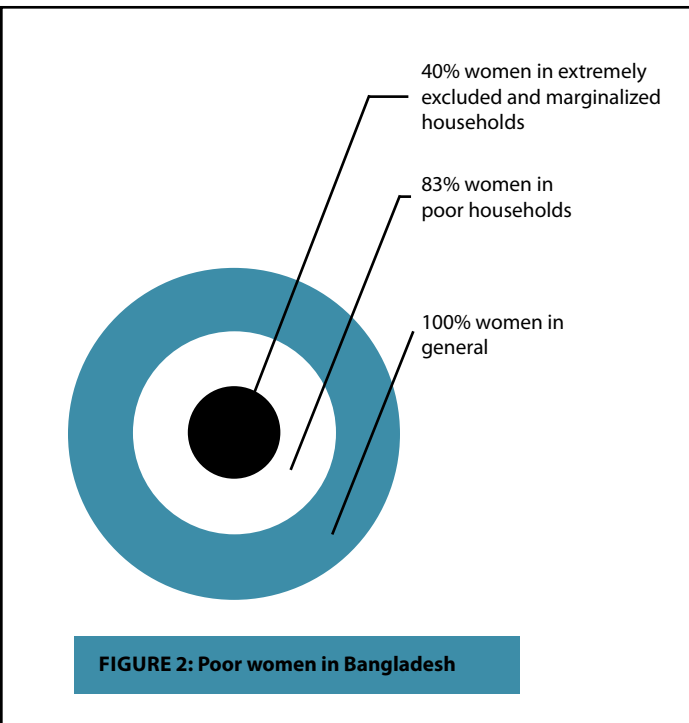
### Which women are we talking about?

The women in Bangladesh are represented here by concentric circles. The whole circle represents all women. Assuming that 50% of the population is composed of women, then there are approximately 75 million women in 30 million households in Bangladesh.

Inside the second circle are women in poor households, which include: the land poor, asset poor, and lower middle class. These women make up 83% of the entire population of women, or sixty-two million women in 24.8 million households.

The innermost circle contains women in extremely excluded and marginalised households. In rural areas, 10% of households are female-headed – and almost 100% of these are marginalised. Also included are women in: absolutely landless households, households with child labour, low-end low-wage jobs, the informal sector, slums, urban areas, and haor-baor-char areas; women who are rural push migrants; poor women under litigation; and women who belong to scheduled castes, indigenous groups, or religious minorities affected by the Enemy Property Act (EPA) or Vested Property Act (VPA). Altogether, these deprived women constitute 40% or a staggering 30 million women, out of a 150 million population, living in some 12 million households.

While women in general are excluded, in terms of land ownership, inheritance laws, and even in terms of denial of



their constitutional rights, the extent of exclusion and deprivation increases as one enters the inner circle.

## Ten Concerns

Women empowerment and land rights face ten major concerns about women empowerment and land rights. The issues mentioned are not merely concerns of Bangladesh; they are applicable for many countries as well.

### 1. Lack of information - knowledge

Who knows the percentage of adult women with land ownership in different countries? Who knows about the proportion of female-headed households having ownership of land? Who knows about the male-female share of khas land ownership? Who knows about the percentage of female-headed households among all recipients of khas land? And who knows about the percentage of women having land ownership, who also have command and control over the same land?

And the answer is: only God knows!

[In Bangladesh], women's share in privately owned agricultural land would be less than one percent.)

### 2. Lack of seriousness about land reform

The term "land reform" is not limited to land per se, but subsumes agrarian reform, land reform, and aquarian or

water reform. Out of 5 million acres of khas land, only 10% or 0.5 million acres have been distributed. The rest of the 4.5 million acres are lying with the land, water and forest grabbers. Under these fall many concerns.

- Where lies the problem of releasing 4.5 million acres of khas land from the land, water, and forest grabbers? Who are the grabbers?
- What happens with the women's ownership of distributed khas land in the case of the husband's death, separation, or divorce?
- Why does a large part of marginalised and female-headed households not get a chance to be included even in the listing for khas land redistribution?
- What is the proportion of female-headed households receiving khas land?
- Why are women from marginalised households not prioritised in khas land distribution?
- Why is the non-retention rate of khas land so high, at nearly 60%?

It is important to look at effective retention of khas land that is distributed to poor and marginalised farmers. Sixty percent is a high proportion of farmers who lose command over their land within a year. Effective ownership and retention of the land entails having the land title, the right to use and the right to harvest from the land.

## TEN CONCERNS

1. Lack of information - knowledge.
2. Lack of seriousness about land reform.
3. Lack of seriousness about the rights of indigenous peoples.
4. Ignoring women as human beings.
5. Lack of seriousness about the rights of religious minorities.
6. Unfair laws of inheritance.
7. Most of us are non-responsive, but some are over-active or hyperactive.
8. When corruption and legal complexity reign.
9. Poor people themselves are dormant.
10. An issue of political will and commitment.



*Why is institutionalizing gender equality in inheritance of land and other property difficult?*

### **3. Lack of seriousness about the rights of indigenous peoples**

Why are indigenous peoples, irrespective of whether they live in the hills or plains, losing their land, water, forest at a rapid pace? Why has the capture of their land by outsiders become a rule? Where lies the problem in instituting the Permanent Land Commission in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in line with the CHT Accord? Why cannot IPs in the plains also have a similar mechanism?

### **4. Ignoring women as human beings**

Where lies the problem in recognising the monetary value of women's economic and household activities and including that in national accounting of GDP?

### **5. Lack of seriousness about the rights of religious minorities**

What prompts a civilised state to continue to perpetuate the deprivation cycle of the Hindu religious minority in the name of Enemy or Vested Property Act (VPA)? This cycle involves 5 interrelated dimensions of deprivation: powerlessness, isolation, vulnerability, poverty and physical weakness. Women, as compared to men, suffer more in the process. VPA has been a major source of violence against women in the Hindu community. What prevents us from resolving this last issue, even after the enactment of the Vested Property Repeal Act 2001? What prevents us from returning the

property affected by the VPA, at least to the female headed households (since all female-headed households in all rural areas are poor)?

### **6. Unfair laws of inheritance**

Existing inheritance laws, patriarchal values and social practices only serve to strengthen discriminatory attitudes towards women. The "good sister" concept prevails, irrespective of Shari'a (Islamic law) or Daibhag (Hindu law). Why is it next to impossible to amend discriminatory inheritance laws and make them more faithful to the spirit of the Constitution and the spirit of justiciable rights? Why is institutionalising gender equality in inheritance of land and other property difficult?

### **7. Most of us are non-responsive, but some are over-active or hyperactive**

Attitudes towards establishing women's rights to land differ; but whatever directions they take, the result is usually to women's great disadvantage. On the one hand, why are state and government institutions passive? Why is civil society not active enough? Why is it that in general, the NGO community, as well as those engaged in land rights advocacy, are not that vibrant? (Vibrancy transcends workshops and mere noise-making). On the other hand, why are the religious fundamentalist political parties and their allies so active against equal rights for women?



## 8. When corruption and legal complexity reign

The entire land administration and management bureaucracy is corrupt. What should be done to make the entire land bureaucracy poor friendly and women friendly? Land laws are written in complicated language, which is not only difficult to understand, but also contradictory. What can be done to redesign land laws so as to make them more understandable for the common people?

## 9. Poor people themselves are dormant

Why are poor people – men and women – themselves not organised to realise their constitutional and justiciable rights on land? Why has it been forgotten that in all land struggles, women have always played a front-running role? What are the problems in organising them?

## 10. An issue of political will and commitment

Land for poor men and women ultimately boils down to political will and commitment. How can the

needed political will and commitment be mobilised? Who should do what to realise this political will and commitment?

## Towards Empowering Women and Establishing Women's Land Rights: What Can Be Done?

First, the State – encompassing government institutions, and agencies – in line with the spirit of the Constitution, should take the lead role in empowering women. But the task is not left entirely to government. Political parties, Parliamentary Standing Committees (i.e., on women, land, law, local government, finance, and planning), local governance institutions, professional bodies, NGOs and other civil society bodies also have decisive roles to play: in movements/struggle; research; advocacy; lobbying; legal support; participation in identification, recovery and distribution of *khas* land to the poor, among others.

While many economists maintain that land reform is a non-issue, we disagree. Land reform, agrarian reform, and aquarian reform are a serious issue.



## WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES IN BANGLADESH

### **Agricultural Activity**

- Preparing field, plant seedlings, weeding etc.
- Employ agricultural labourer
- Work in the homestead vegetables garden
- Reaping crops
- Thrashing
- Collecting seeds, drying
- Preparing seed bed
- Irrigation
- Harvesting
- Drying crops
- Boiling rice
- Husking
- Winnowing (dust off)
- Storing/preserving seed
- Other agricultural activities

### **Income Generating Activity**

- Treatment of poultry and cattle
- Agricultural labour
- Non-agricultural labour
- Shop keeping
- Pulling rickshaw/van, boat
- Doing other IGA
- Mechanical works
- Potter works
- Timber works
- Painting works
- Mason works/construction
- Service/office works
- Trading works

### **Poultry and Animal Husbandry**

- Taking care of chickens and ducks (cleaning, feeding, setting free in the morning, caging in the evening)
- Taking care of cows, goats
- Taking cattle to field for grazing
- Milking cows
- Collecting eggs
- Selling eggs/milk
- Cutting grass for cattle

### **Handicrafts**

- Bamboo/cane works
- Handloom/knit works
- Weaving mat
- Weaving net
- Weaving *chhika*/rope
- Making dresses
- Sewing clothes
- Embroidery works

### **Personal Tasks**

- Prayer
- Taking meals
- Morning business
- Bath
- Personal washing (for prayer)
- Study
- Going to office for any purpose
- Physical exercise
- Walking/roaming
- Taking part in local adjudications (*Shalish*)

### **Household works**

- Cleaning house/sweeping/wiping
- Cleaning house sides
- Smearing floor
- Washing HH utensils
- Washing clothes
- Drying clothes
- Ironing clothes
- Cooking
- Serving meals
- Cleaning hurricane lamps, etc. and putting fuel into them
- Collecting fuel wood
- Making kindling (*ghute*)
- Collecting water
- Supervising HH works
- Helping others in HH work
- Making *chira/muri/khoi*
- Making cakes

### **Leisure**

- Gossiping
- Watching TV
- Listening Radio
- Taking beetle leaves/tobacco
- Visiting relatives/friend
- Resting
- Sleeping
- Attending social function
- Going to club/ meeting/cooperatives/ organizations
- Doing tasks related to hobby

Finally, “conscientisation of women” should be promoted. This process of liberatory education for social change, process to critically respond to dominant culture, process to realize women’s agency role, must be instituted. This will break the culture of silence, change the mindset of men, promote collective action of poor and marginalized, and accelerate the process of ensuring poor people’s well-being.

## A PARTING THOUGHT

Then, if all the above is true or partly true, then why not devote more time, energy and resources to expedite the process of women’s conscientisation and agrarian-land-aquarian reforms, which in turn will form a solid knowledge and action base for establishing women’s land rights? ■