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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Feminisation of agriculture and land management: gendered impacts on women’s livelihoods in northwest Bangladesh

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Abstract

Women have a significant parallel role in land management, similar to their male counterparts. Therefore, when addressing of planetary health, land system transformations need to be examined both from environmental and gendered perspectives. Based on this proposition, this study focuses on northwest Bangladesh to explore how changes in land use affect women’s livelihoods and agency, utilising an intersectional gender tracking framework. The region is marked by intensive agricultural land use, emerging climate vulnerabilities, and entrenched gender norms. The study challenges traditional masculinities and sheds light on the power dynamics that shape both access to land and the burdens of ecological degradation. To achieve this, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions, covering 105 households using 15 FGDs, 12 key informant interviews, and 10 in-depth interviews during April to November 2023. This study explored gendered dynamics through the ‘gender tracking framework’ by analysing three core dimensions: Access and Control over Resources—who owns, uses, and benefits from land; Agency and Voice—whose perspectives influence land use decisions; and Well-being and Risk Exposure—how ecological and economic risks are distributed across gender and class. The research highlights how changing cropping patterns, mechanisation, and commercialisation marginalise women—especially those from low-income, indigenous, or female-headed households. Though women are increasingly active as agricultural labour, they remain largely excluded from land ownership, decision-making, and formal land markets. Simultaneously, men’s identities are also fluid, as rural masculinities tied to land control and provider roles are destabilised by outmigration, land fragmentation, and market uncertainty. Findings also reveal that land system changes contribute to hidden forms of stress, nutritional insecurity, and reduced autonomy for rural women, while also generating crises of masculinity among men unable to fulfil socially constructed roles. Surprisingly, the study identifies that women are collectively practicing agroecology, landless labour unions are advocating for equitable land access, and community dialogues on shared land stewardship. These grassroots innovations point toward a broader rethinking of gender norms as part of a just response to environmental change. The study concludes with a call for gender-transformative policies that not only promote land rights for women but also dismantle restrictive masculinities.

Keywords: Gender norms, gender tracking framework, land management, masculinities, northwest Bangladesh

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