



# Beyond the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’: Rural out-migration, shifting gender relations and emerging spaces in natural resource management

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## ABSTRACT

In international research and development discourses, the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ is often used as a vague umbrella term referring to an increase in women’s labor burden and responsibilities in agriculture as a result of male out-migration. However, the term is under-conceptualized, and fails to reflect changing gender relations in agriculture and natural resource management, with the potential consequence of ill-defined agriculture and gender research programs. This paper challenges narratives of the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’. Drawing from feminist political ecology, this paper conceptualizes gender relations more broadly by highlighting gendered subjectivities and power relations in agriculture in contexts of male out-migration. I propose a conceptual framework to explore shifts in (1) socio-spatial struggles over resources, (2) influence within agrarian households and communal spaces, (3) aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination. I build on extensive participatory fieldwork conducted in three countries, Nepal, India and Bangladesh.

The conceptual framework helps analyze how some gender norms and relations are renegotiated in contexts of male out-migration. While unequal power relations shape everyday struggles in agriculture and natural resource management, for some women, increased mobility, social engagement and handling cash create new spaces to influence, move, and communicate. Importantly, everyday struggles over agricultural, water and land resources remain shaped by gender, age, caste, land ownership, remittances and household position, particularly those living with the family in-laws. Research and development programs need to take intersectionality into account and explore emerging spaces for influence, but also be aware of persistent gender norms and power relations which shape agricultural practices, aspirations and self-determination. I conclude by arguing for the need to expand the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ debate towards a broader understanding of socio-spatial change and gendered subjectivities within agriculture.

## 1. Introduction

Migration from rural to urban areas, and abroad, of mainly young men for better economic opportunities is a relevant phenomenon in many countries around the world (ILO, 2020). Male out-migration in Africa and South Asia is often associated with women and the elderly being ‘left behind’, as well as the degeneration of rural landscapes marked by land abandonment, decreased agricultural productivity and deteriorating irrigation systems (Maharjan et al., 2020; Rigg, 2006; Sugden et al., 2014). Along with the commonly used terms ‘left behind’ and ‘deagrarianization’ (Bryceson, 2002; Hebinck et al., 2018), the phrase ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ is used widely but inconsistently in gender and development studies, and has entered research, development and policy more broadly. The ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ tends to mark a distinct demographic shift in rural, agrarian communities in

terms of gender. With an unclear definition, it refers vaguely to women’s increased participation in agricultural labor or decision-making, as a result of male out-migration and livelihood diversification (Gartaula et al., 2010; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006; Maharajan et al., 2012; Tamang et al., 2014). The World Bank (2016) uses the term in their multi-country report to refer to an increase in women’s contribution to the agricultural labor force relative to men, while also admitting that data on women’s changing roles “within agriculture (from contributing family members on the farm to primary farmers) or changing activities (from subsistence to wage employment) are hard to detect at the national level with the data currently available” (Slavchevska et al., 2016).

Likewise, the lack of male labor and women managing farms are assumptions based on limited evidence (Doss et al., 2017). The literature encompasses valuable sex-disaggregated data on labor roles and responsibilities in agriculture, decision-making (“management”), and

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ownership of productive resources such as water and land, and assets such as credit and training and related quantitative assessments in various contexts (Adhikari and Hobley, 2015; Kelkar, 2007; Paris et al., 2005; Radel et al., 2012). However, scholars point out it neither provides sufficient empirical substance nor an analytical framework to explain and understand gendered agrarian change processes (Bieri, 2014). Hence, there remains a need to conceptualize gender relations more broadly beyond agency and productivity in order to help frame underlying power relations and structural changes in agriculture. A deeper qualitative engagement to understand shifting social dynamics may help understand how gender norms and relations are renegotiated in contexts of male out-migration.

The discourse around the term ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ is built on a dichotomist and essentialist understanding of women and men. ‘Feminization’ implies that agricultural systems were ‘masculinized’ before, and that women are now, in the absence of men, compelled to assume tasks previously constructed as masculine – such as taking decisions on agricultural plots, handling cash, plowing, irrigating and participating in resource user group meetings. Further, it is assumed that women’s involvement brings new attributes to agricultural practices which are ascribed to be feminine. Therefore, the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ discourse and related studies tend to work with contradictions, presenting migrants’ wives as either empowered or vulnerable, as ‘winners’ due to increased decision-making opportunities, or ‘losers’ due to an increasing labor burden. It is also important to note that in several regional contexts, for example, in Southeast Asia in Indonesia and the Philippines, female out-migration is as common as male out-migration (Lam and Yeoh, 2018; Mulyoutami et al., 2020).

This paper examines to what extent the term ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ and its use in recent research and development programs can capture changing gender relations in agriculture and natural resource management. Related indicators such as a rise in “female household heads” or the changing gender distribution of labor and responsibilities in agriculture are often inadequate and insufficient to explain agrarian change in the context of rural out-migration. A broader, justice-oriented understanding of gender relations within agrarian change migration is needed beyond what has been so far understood with the term ‘Feminization of Agriculture’

Existing scholarship could benefit from greater engagement with feminist political ecology (FPE). This paper offers a conceptual framework, drawing from FPE, to highlight and work through key dynamics of what could characterize the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’. The framework promotes a relational and intersectional understanding of gender when exploring shifts in agriculture and natural resource management in the context of migration and livelihood diversification.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, I will review studies on the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ and related literature to point out the limitations of the term and its use, and the complex impacts of male out-migration, shifting gender relations and agricultural practices.

Second, I introduce a conceptual framework for exploring changing gender norms and power relations drawing from FPE. Based on participatory fieldwork on rural out-migration in the Eastern Gangetic Plains, I illustrate emerging new spaces and continued marginalization processes in three sections, which identify shifts in: (1) socio-spatial struggles over resources (2), influence within agrarian households and communal spaces, (3) aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination. I conclude by arguing for the need to expand the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ debate towards a broader understanding of socio-spatial change and gendered subjectivities within agriculture.

## 2. Current state of literature on the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’

Originating in poverty debates (‘feminization of poverty’), the term ‘feminization’ was soon carried over to agriculture despite the criticism of being undertheorized while overgeneralizing women as victims, rather than addressing structural constraints (Chant, 2006). Since

Boserup’s publication on “Women’s role in economic development” in 1970, awareness and research on women’s role in agriculture has increased significantly.

The use of the term ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ has been beneficial in raising awareness of the importance of gender in international agricultural research programs<sup>1</sup> and rural development practice. However, intersectionality is often understood as additive (‘to include’), and further fixes specific gender roles and responsibilities to class or age categories, rather than looking at the production of marginalizing or empowering processes and social relations in the context of agrarian change (Leder and Sachs, 2019).

Recent critical scholars point out the limitations of binary approaches to gender research (e.g. men vs. women) and demonstrates the value of intersectional framings of gender and other social relations as process (Harris, 2006; Mollett and Faria, 2013; Nightingale, 2006, 2011; Sultana, 2011). However, many gender and development studies still struggle to apply intersectional and relational analyses, and instead run the risk of essentializing discourses and approaches to gender or other social differences (Cornwall et al., 2007).

Hence there is a danger of reproducing ideological framings homogenizing women and men. The discourse around a ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ runs the risk of reducing women to being seen as either ‘left behind’ or as a ‘female head of household’ by development workers and researchers. The imposition of particular ideas of femininities and masculinities through research and development runs the risk of disempowering women. This ‘agrarianization of women’ in research and development assumes that women want to be farmers, and reduces women to one economic sector and its value, whereas the important role of remittances, or other income opportunities, and social and family roles are often overlooked. However, feminist research has demonstrated that such simplified and fixed understandings of gender are problematic, as gendered subjectivities are produced and shift over space and time (Nightingale, 2006).

Development buzzwords often simplify the reality in order to allow multiple stakeholders with different interests to have common ground for discussion. Cornwall (2007) suggests constructively deconstructing buzzwords and unclear terminology in development discourse in order to rehabilitate and reflect upon them. The other option – to reject certain terms and replace them with new concepts – may lead to the same process of depoliticization or simplification of those new terms. Hence, the term ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ needs deconstructing, with the aim of connecting the term to new narratives.

The ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ literature can be divided into macro-scale and micro-scale studies. Macro-scale studies examine sex-disaggregated data on the distribution of agricultural labor at the national level (Agarwal, 2011). Despite claims that women “become major actors” in agriculture, the available survey data is limited (Slavchevska et al., 2016). The myth that 60-80% of women produce food globally has been criticized for methodological reasons, e.g. the influence of social norms in answering questionnaires for national data collection, the very definition of agricultural labor and its complex separation between male and female members, as well as unaccounted labor with livestock and kitchen gardens, which women often undertake (Doss et al., 2017). Scholars in China have put forward contradictory findings, calling Feminization of Agriculture a “myth” with female labor share decreasing since 1995 (de Brauw et al., 2008), but when applying different statistical methods, coming to the opposite conclusion (de Brauw et al.,

<sup>1</sup> For example, the term is frequently used in projects of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, ACIAR, or the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. In September 2018, the Collaborative Platform for Gender Research of the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)<sup>2</sup> called for research proposals on the “‘Feminization’ of Agriculture: Building evidence to debunk myths on current challenges and opportunities”.

2013). Hence large-scale data sets and their analyses seem to have limited reliability. They apply a binary (men vs. women) rather than intersectional approach to gender, compare very different cultural contexts, and use data collection methods which are based on culturally problematic concepts such as the head of household (Deere et al., 2012; Twyman et al., 2015).

Informal labor arrangements in small-scale family-based farming prevalent in South Asia make it difficult to measure exact numbers regarding what to count as agricultural labor and what not. This also prompts the question whether women are actually taking on more and different roles in agriculture than before, or whether the attention has simply shifted to women as they have always been involved in agriculture. For example, Deere (2005) demonstrates that in Latin America, women's agricultural wage labor has increased due to economic crises, neoliberal restructuring and the growth of rural poverty, while countries show variations in whether there has been an increase in "female household heads" in smallholder production.

Micro-scale studies demonstrate varied effects of male out-migration on women's labor burden in agriculture (Pattnaik et al., 2017), their control over remittances, and their participation and decision-making roles in agriculture and natural resource management (Jaquet et al., 2016; Lama et al., 2017; Tamang et al., 2014). Several studies highlight changing agricultural practices and productivity, such as increased income or land left fallow (Bhattarai et al., 2015; Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Schutter, 2013). Most studies found contradictions and pointed to a range of other influential factors apart from gender, such as caste and class (Rao, 2014; Sugden et al., 2014). Critiques underline the importance of differentiating the "feminization of agricultural labor" from "farm management", as only the latter is linked to increased decision-making responsibilities (Bikketi et al., 2016; Gartaula et al., 2010; Maharajan et al., 2012; Radel et al., 2012). Although much of the research is conducted at the household and village level, the differentiation between farm labor and management marks an important shift from the focus of women's labor contribution in agriculture alone to questions over shifting control and power relations in agriculture. Spangler and Christie (2020) suggest applying FPE to identify that gendered knowledge is changing and that gendered rights and responsibilities are renegotiated in regard to cultivation practices, within and beyond complex household structures in the context of migration in the mid-hills of Nepal.

Studies on out-migration and gender relations come to slightly different, but problematic conclusions: that male out-migration leads either to women's empowerment or vulnerability. Some argue that out-migration can lead to new vulnerabilities such as an increased labor burden, land abandonment and reduced crops and food security for those "left behind" (Adhikari and Holey, 2015; Bettini et al., 2017; Bhattarai et al., 2015; Desai and Banerji, 2008; Gartaula et al., 2010). Others note greater control over decision-making in agriculture and the household by women and other marginalized community members, as well as an economic uplift of households due to remittances (Giri and Darnhofer, 2010; Maharajan et al., 2012). An increase in decision-making power is often seen as an indicator of women's empowerment (Alkire et al., 2013; Maharajan et al., 2012). However, recent research highlights that increased individual decision-making over productive resources does not necessarily contribute to women feeling empowered (Leder and Sachs, 2019). Latest studies on empowerment and vulnerability have highlighted social relations and processes which cannot be simplified to measuring individual decision-making power, labor burden or economic benefits alone (Leder et al., 2017; O'Hara and Clement, 2018; Sugden et al., 2014). To understand complex and contradictory effects of male out-migration in each context, rather than drawing linear conclusions, relational ties are decisive for a situated, processual and intersectional understanding of empowerment and vulnerability (Leder et al., 2017).

Previous research demonstrated the importance of intra-household relationships for labor allocation and shifts in gender relations: the

extent to which women engage in water user groups, for example, depends not only on the absence of men, but on whether there are other women in the household, as well as their age, class, ethnicity and caste (Leder et al., 2017). Similarly, others argue for the importance of household composition and the age of the children, as this influences how women engage in the public sphere (Gartaula et al., 2012). Maharajan et al. (2012) conclude that it depends on migration patterns and remittances received whether women can reduce their work load and improve their decision-making role at the household level. Sugden et al. (2014) demonstrated how increased labor burden in the context of male out-migration is remarkably dependent on gender, class and caste in the Eastern Gangetic Plains. They observed that while migration occurs in all socio-economic groups, women in marginal and tenant farming families are most vulnerable to ecological shocks such as droughts due to the sporadic flow of income and their reduced capacity for investment in off-farm activities.

Only a few studies have engaged with the more structural question of how far gender norms and relations are renegotiated in contexts of male out-migration and lead to transformative change. Rao and Mitra (2013) demonstrate the complexities around out-migration in a village in Jharkhand, India, and state emerging possibilities for the renegotiation of class and gender relations due to the declining value of local knowledge. In cases where the status for the household improved economically and employing laborers was possible, this provided an opportunity for further controlling women's mobility and voice, and reduced women's visible contributions to the productive process (Rao and Mitra (2013)). Ge et al. (2011) employ a performative and intersectional approach to demonstrate how migrants remain embedded within a strong fabric of gender, class and kinship that constitutes their communities, and that gender norms are reiterated after the return of the migrant in a Chinese village. Winters (2014) demonstrates the fluidity of migration, and that families' daily realities are a mix of migrant and non-migrant father involvement in care work via (mobile) communication and guidance. She highlights how migrants are not just absent, but that multilocal family connections shape family decision-making. Similarly, multi-sited households draw their resources from a variety of locations, and these translocal flows of capital and ideas (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2016) can influence the incentives and ability to engage in local resource management (Pradhan, 2000).

The cited studies open up space to re-think shifts in complex socio-spatial relationships and agrarian change beyond current narratives of the 'Feminization of Agriculture'. Thus, underscoring the need for an intersectional and relational framework to study migration-induced changes in agriculture.

### 3. A framework to explore changing gender relations in contexts of male out-migration

To move beyond a simplified, essentialist and quantitative approach to gender roles and responsibilities in the 'Feminization of Agriculture' ('more women practice or manage more agricultural labor'), I propose to ground the debate by conceptualizing gender relations drawing from feminist political ecology (FPE). Engaging with FPE is helpful to understand socio-culturally embedded roots of gender norms and power relations in agriculture and natural resource management practices. To do justice to socio-culturally heterogeneous contexts in which norms and attributes ascribed to being feminine or masculine vary, and to avoid homogenizing and essentializing women and men, gender requires a fluid understanding and an intersectional analysis to identify and analyze gendered patterns of social and agrarian change. Gender is seen not as a fixed identity, but as ascribed subjectivities which are highly relational and vary within everyday contexts (Nightingale, 2006). FPE argues for the importance of intersectionality and linking gender relations to broader mechanisms of power relations and their material production (Elmhirst, 2011; Harris, 2008; Nightingale, 2006, 2011). Intra-household relations and inter-household relations are

shaped by class, kinship, caste and other social relations which constantly shift over time and space (Nightingale, 2011; Rao et al., 2020). Such a relational and intersectional perspective might help direct conceptual framings in research and development practice, and provide empirical insights into how to quantify changing gender relations differently (Okali, 2012), especially by paying greater attention to the complexities of household relations (e.g. daughter-in-law with absent husband). It is important to unpack “women” as a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous group, and to avoid the creation of a “feminization of responsibility and obligation” (Chant, 2008) in agriculture. With this, research can focus on the processual and structural changes in rural villages and agricultural resource management. FPE has helped to understand structural change in collective action (Clement et al., 2019), environmental conflicts (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2019), agriculture (Leder et al., 2019), water (Harris, 2008; Sultana, 2011), natural resource governance and climate change (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Gonda, 2019).

I propose three analytical categories to explore how *gender norms, power relations and gendered subjectivities* in agriculture and (natural) resource management in the context of out-migration are changing. Conventional descriptive narratives are asking how (1) gendered labor roles and formal access to resources, (2) decision-making and sex-disaggregated responsibilities, and (3) agricultural productivity are changing. Based on the empirical material, the following three new categories emerged, and were used to explore shifts in (1) socio-spatial struggles over resources, (2) influence in agrarian households and communal spaces, (3) aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination (Fig. 1). I briefly sketch what these categories entail before turning to the empirical analysis which speaks to these aspects in greater detail.

As women move, communicate and act in previously masculine spaces, boundaries of social difference and gender norms are shifting, shaping *socio-spatial struggles over resources* (1). The ability to enter new spaces, such as markets, fields and resource user group meetings, produces new subjectivities of “female farmers”. Socio-spatial struggles over resources can highlight the time, emotional burden and money invested to access resources (Sultana, 2011). The sole measurement of sex-disaggregated labor roles and responsibilities in agriculture at the household level may overshadow these struggles. Struggles are experienced particularly relation to gender norms, but, for example, class and land ownership, can interact to either maintain or transform these struggles over resources. Increased physical mobilities and social engagement at the community level raise awareness and shift perceptions of what it means to be female and male, and how femininities and masculinities are enacted. This results in shifting *influence in agrarian households and communal spaces* (2). At times, women may experience pride in being a female farmer, by handling cash or by making practical household and farming decisions, yet often in consultation with their husbands via phone. In other instances, when entering new spaces such as meetings of water user groups, despite or precisely because they are representing their husband as “household head”, women experience being ignored and excluded. In these spaces, social difference, in particular gender inequality, is exposed and newly experienced, and can be even exacerbated. This can affect *aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination* (3).

This framework can unpack the multiple dimensions of the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ by combining agrarian practices (gender roles and responsibilities) with normative changes (gender norms and subjectivities). Examining processes of intertwined social and agricultural changes and emerging spaces of influence is intended as an alternative to narratives of ‘Feminization of Agriculture’, which solely stress women’s labor contribution in agriculture.

#### 4. Methods

My analysis is based on five years of research (2015–2020) on rural

out-migration, gender relations and agrarian change in the Eastern Gangetic Plains. The migrant economy in the Eastern Gangetic Plains has had uneven effects on gender norms and power relations over resources and tenure in agriculture. Gender norms and relations are contextual in every village, and generalizations about women or a ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ would misrepresent the diverse groups of small-scale farmers and tenants. The major argument to challenge the narratives of and research approaches on the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ emerged throughout extensive participatory fieldwork and literature research. My research was part of an internationally funded action research project<sup>2</sup> implemented in eight villages in Nepal (Eastern Terai) and India (Northern Bihar/West Bengal), and Northwestern Bangladesh (Rangpur/Thakurgaon) (Fig. 2). The sites were selected based on a scoping study’s biophysical and social criteria for experimenting with collective farming and dry-season irrigation (Leder et al., 2019; Sugden et al., 2020).

I conducted 80 semi-structured interviews and 21 focus group discussions and a range of informal discussions, transect walks, participatory village resource maps and participant observations. The semi-structured interviews were with female and male farmers of different caste, class, religion, ethnicity and age and different farmer groups were disaggregated by gender, land ownership and religion/caste/ethnicity. I conducted the data collection myself during repetitive visits to all sites over a period of five years with the reliance of translators who were project staff, e.g. NGO staff or research assistants. The questions and observations focused on understanding social relations, experiences and perceptions of migration and changing agricultural practices, and water and land resource management among diverse small-scale and tenant farmers. Field encounters and action research often created lively discussions, observing negotiation processes and everyday struggles over (agricultural) water resources in the context of male out-migration. During and after interviews, discussions, and observations, the meaning of what has been said or was observed was further discussed and clarified extensively. The empirical material would be a rich resource to understand the diversity of trajectories and the factors shaping these in a comparative study on the sites located in different regions (Leder, 2015); however, the following analysis focuses on fieldwork which is representative of broader gender struggles in the context of agrarian change and rural out-migration.

#### 5. Shifting socio-spatial struggles over resources

While the literature on the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ tends to look at labor roles or formal rules of access, I suggest exploring shifting socio-spatial struggles over resources in the absence of male household members. In the following, I draw from my fieldwork to illustrate how socio-spatial shifts over (water) resources in agriculture can either open up or close down opportunities to negotiate resource access.

When entering the male domain of irrigation, which is linked to accessing public space and negotiating with usually male landowners who own pump sets and tube wells, gendered subjectivities can shift, as one woman stated in Saptari, in Nepal’s Tarai: “Women do not feel shy to speak to strangers anymore, they have become active. We women tell men (now) to repair water connections!” In the absence of her out-migrated husband, she had learned to approach male neighbors and demand their support in irrigation despite her community’s initial disapproval. She further stated: “They used to discourage me and tell me ‘aren’t you ashamed of yourself for speaking up when males are there’. Now they don’t say that but it used to be like that before.” (S\_14H). This

<sup>2</sup> The project “Dry-season irrigation for marginal and tenant farmers in the Eastern Gangetic Plains” was funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), and co-funded by the CGIAR Research Program “Water, Land and Ecosystems” (WLE) and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU).

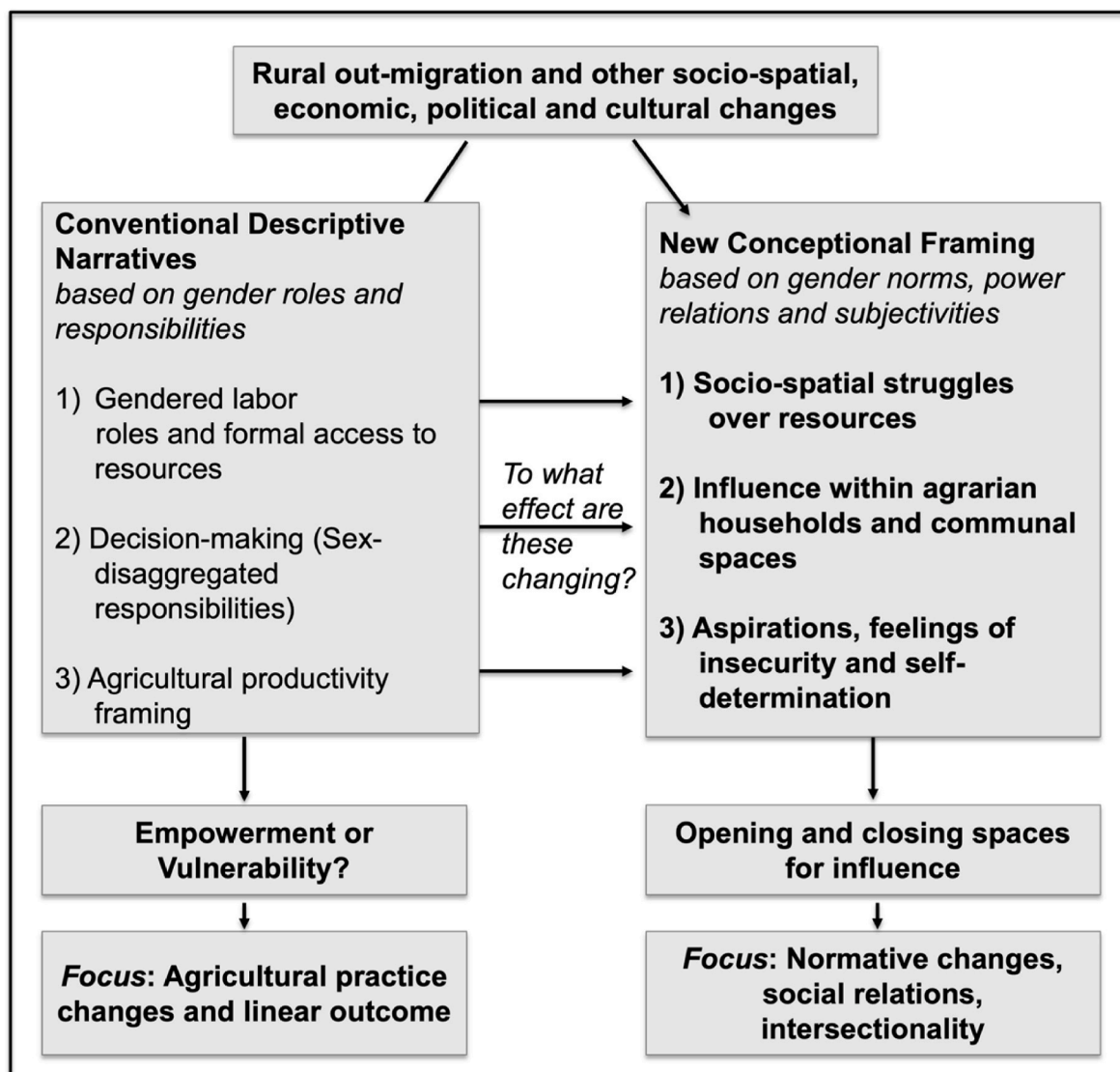


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework to analyze changing gender relations within rural out-migration, commonly referred to as the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ (own draft).

demonstrates a profound shift in the exercise of power by both women and men: women’s subjectivities change as they become more outspoken and confident in interactions with men, while at the same time, men refrain from telling women to leave the speaking up to their male family members.

In the absence of her out-migrated husband, new spaces emerged: she increased her geographical mobility, social engagement and handling cash. To support her family’s farming, she negotiates with neighbors and pump owners, or sells her vegetables at the local market. With these experiences, her self-confidence grew, and she felt more comfortable expressing her needs in public, where she received increasing recognition from fellow male and female farmers.

Contrastingly, gendered subjectivities can be reinforced when women are exposed to continuous public critique or neglect. As handling irrigation pumps used to be the task of men, women farmers can experience severe physical discomfort and require more time and patience to irrigate their fields. For example, in the village of Mauahi in Madhubani, Bihar, several women stated that they feel less powerful than men regarding accessing water, particularly if they lack good relations to the tube well and pump owner, and if they do not have sufficient land holdings. One woman shared her everyday struggles of both her need and her limited capacity to apply pressure when requesting water:

“I have to run after people to get water. People listen more to my husband, he can build pressure, but I can’t. As I am a woman, they take it easy. They ignore and neglect me because I am a woman. There is not much to do about it, I have to face it and run four times, if it is like that” (B\_I4)

Her plight highlights the rigid social structures and her powerlessness to change gendered norms which constrain her access to water. Despite her critical awareness of the discrimination she faces, the woman accepts the burden of asking multiple times for water as she does not see any opportunity to change this. She experiences discriminatory gender norms in her everyday life when she wants to fulfil her family’s needs to access irrigation water, and develops mechanisms to deal with this discrimination accordingly, in this case approaching the pump owner repeatedly. Other women confirmed that these experiences are a collective constraint, particularly for women-headed households with marginal land holdings. Two other women in Mauahi stated that they had to delay cooking for their children to repeatedly ask the pump owner for water (B\_23, B\_28). They accept these effects on their family and act accordingly by approaching tube well owners more often. Hence, delayed irrigation can have both direct and indirect effects on the everyday food security of families – directly when cooking is delayed,

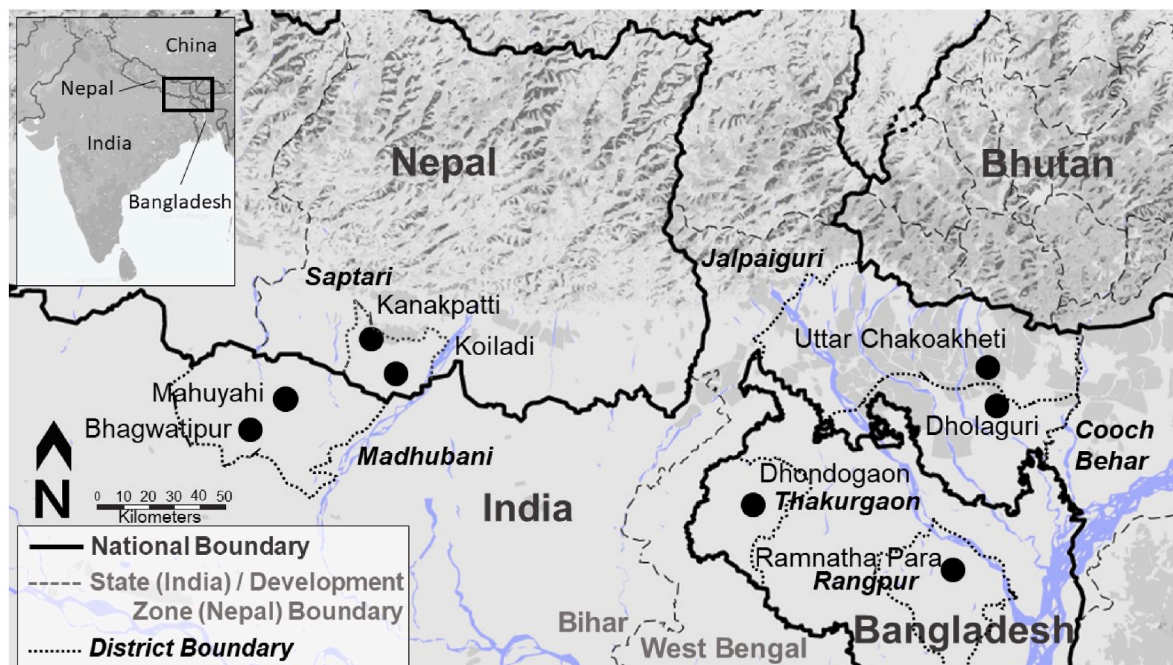


Fig. 2. Location of the eight study villages in the Eastern Gangetic Plains.

and indirectly, when crops are not irrigated at the appropriate time, which may lead to reduced produce at harvest time.

Socio-spatial struggles materializing in negotiations on irrigation are also shaped by the performance of masculine attributes. In the villages of Koirala and Parbaha in the Eastern Terai, a woman explains her limited capacity to demand irrigation through the low volume and firmness of her voice:

“The one who has a powerful voice gets his field irrigated first. So, women whose husbands are out are usually more softly spoken and do not get their fields irrigated” (T\_I3)

This metaphor of a physical masculine feature, a powerful voice, depicts a collection of power features attributed to men. These stand in opposition to the feminine “soft voice”, which can less forcefully demand timely irrigation. Hence, depending on the performance of masculine attributes, women might be more likely to succeed in accessing water. In this way, gendered subjectivities reinforce socio-spatial struggles as women are entering the irrigation sector in the absence of male household members.

Gendered subjectivities are not only based on physical features, but also produced through public appearances and “roaming around” in communal spaces. In the village of Baghwatipur in Bihar, one woman stated that men are more mobile and randomly roam around the village and, therefore, they can remind the pump owner more frequently to use the pump than women, who only go purposefully to ask (B\_28). Men in the village were also in contact with the pump owner to discuss other farming issues, such as land tenure regulations, regularly and informally, while women receive less information on these themes. Some women noted that they do not have the social networks and as many contacts as their husbands and that they feel uncomfortable approaching male neighbors to request the use of a well. Being both socially and spatially excluded from mostly male networks can increase women’s struggles to access resources such as water and land when male family members are absent. Hence socio-spatial struggles experienced after out-migration are strongly shaped by reinforced gendered subjectivities.

There are further aspects shaping socio-spatial struggles in the absence of male household members: women irrigators are not seen as being such important customers as men. One woman in Baghwatipur, Bihar, stated, that it is usually men who pay instantly, while women

often have to delay paying for irrigation as they have to wait until they receive remittances, or they even take loans (B\_30).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, some women in Saptari complained that they were often overcharged, on the pretext. That they could afford it as they receive remittances from their husbands abroad. This shows how women become more or less valued customers based on how the pump owner perceives their financial capacities and reliability.

If cash is available within the household, women can reduce their work burden by hiring laborers for irrigation, plowing, harvesting and other tasks, or even leave land fallow if there is no economic need to cultivate. Withdrawing from agricultural work and public space is culturally particularly desired for young daughters-in-law of higher caste and class who are expected to stay inside and fulfil domestic tasks instead of working in the fields, unless it is economically necessary. Not being engaged in agriculture reduces their experience of socio-spatial struggles over resources. However, gendered subjectivities are further reinforced if women continue to be withdrawn from the public and do not challenge the existing restrictions. In Loha Piper (Madhubani), for example, one woman whose husband migrated admitted that her brother solves problems for her, as alone she cannot rely on getting water in time (B\_I7). Access to irrigation is important for agrarian households, but the need for individual women to be part of the decision-making on water resources, is not necessarily a priority if there are other supportive family members to take care of irrigation.

To avoid challenging gender norms, several women and men ask and sometimes even pay something extra to male family members or neighbors to negotiate with the pump owner and to arrange irrigation for their fields (e.g. B\_FGD1). In particular, help from the family, neighbors or laborers is sought for male specific tasks such as plowing and applying pesticides and fertilizers. This shift of responsibilities from husbands to other men in the family or neighborhood can reproduce or

<sup>3</sup> To support each other, a barter system is still in place in which women provide their labor for transplanting and harvesting in the field in exchange for their male neighbors’ support to negotiate with the pump owner and to arrange and supervise irrigation for their fields. The Barter system as a reciprocal exchange of services may be beneficial for both parties, but could also be regarded as a medium which facilitates and sustains a gendered division of labor.

even exacerbate women's dependence on others in the context of male out-migration.

These struggles over resources reflect diverse consequences of male out-migration and women's increased public exposure in primarily masculine environments. Unequal gender relations can lead to delayed irrigation and increased household food insecurity, and a higher family financial and time burden to secure water for their irrigation needs. Taking intersectionality into account, the examples show that not only gender relations, but the particular class and caste relations affect whether socio-spatial constraints to access resources can be decreased.

Similar struggles are faced when accessing markets, e.g. to buy inputs such as seeds. As women enter male space, they become critically aware of how gendered norms constrain their ability to bargain. Although visiting markets may lead to new socio-spatial exposure and learning, women stated having limited knowledge of market prices and consequently a lack of bargaining power to negotiate lower prices. This is due to the way men have set the bargaining rules that impede women from participating on equal terms. Such gendered subjectivities reinforce existing power relations in the market place. The tasks of communicating with traders and going to market, are often transferred to other family members, e.g. younger boys,<sup>4</sup> or male neighbors. In Dholaguri, West Bengal, women stated that they prefer their husbands being there to sell their products to middle men at the market, since in bargaining processes there is "more respect for the husband" (WB\_FGD 1). Furthermore, men have "more information and understanding of the market" (WB\_FGD 1). To engage in public negotiation might not be culturally desirable for Muslim women or high caste Hindus in which the tradition of "Purdah", the female seclusion to the domestic space, is practiced.

Women's physical exposure allows the reinforcement of existing gendered subjectivities in these spaces, and makes visible the struggles of transforming them. Nevertheless, it is increasingly becoming socially acceptable for women to enter, communicate and act in public spaces, while women experience severe gender discrimination.

## 6. Shifting influence in agrarian households and communal spaces

The impact of rural out-migration on decision-making, disaggregated by sex, has been studied and linked to a 'Feminization of Agriculture', but new insights can be gained by looking at shifting influence in agrarian households and communal spaces from a perspective of gendered subjectivities. Power relations are shifting in different ways among diverse women and men, and shape an individual's influence in communal spaces and negotiations in markets, water user groups, local self-governments, or land tenure arrangements. An intersectional perspective, taking, for example, age into account, can provide insights into why a mother-in-law may gain influence, while a daughter-in-law may not. In the following, I will demonstrate why influence and gendered subjectivities are changing in the absence of men for some women, but not others.

Patriarchal hierarchies are maintained when a mother-in-law moves into a new position of power in the family. The mother-in-law moves into the role of the absent husband, increasing her influence in the household, whereas the daughter-in-law has the same limited options to influence decision-making as before. During an interview in the Eastern Terai, one mother-in-law stated proudly on taking over a powerful position towards the daughter-in-law: "When her husband is not there, I

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, age related norms on mobility are more likely to be destabilized than gender norms. It is more likely that young boys and older mothers-in-law take over agricultural responsibilities or market visits than young daughters-in-law. This demonstrates social change from the "edges" – working through the hierarchies of a patriarchal and gerontocratic society with women considered most subordinate and vulnerable to transgressing norms.

am her husband" (T\_I9, mother-in-law). The mother-in-law feels more empowered over the daughter-in-law, who will clean the house, and work on the field according to what she tells her. The daughter-in-law even stated in an interview that she prefers to have her husband around, as he would let her move around and handle cash more than her mother-in-law would, and therefore, she cannot wait for her husband's return. Here, unequal relations continue or are even exacerbated in the absence of men. This example also demonstrates the importance of gender relationships rather than just focusing on women's empowerment. Notably, the dynamics of power remain the same. Hence there can be a gap between shifts in women's or men's subjectivities, and changes (or not) in power relationships.

As soon as their children are married and wives become mothers-in-law, they gain respect in their role, which is also linked to greater mobility and greater influence within the family. Several families were observed in which the daughters-in-law felt their mothers-in-law contribute to limiting their agency by controlling money, burdening them with work and restricting their mobility. Some women in the Bihar and Tarai sites explained that they would not ask in-laws to keep money themselves due to respect. One mother explained the effect that children perceive their grandparents as a greater authority than her, as the in-laws receive remittances and handle financial decisions. A young woman stated that most family quarrels are with in-laws: "The roots of quarrel is money, if in-laws are not working, and unequal distribution of household work" (T\_I8). Another young wife perceived her mother-in-law even "equal to men" (BD\_I15), as she is educated, intelligent, moves a lot and able to bargain. Others stated feeling neglected by their husbands in favor of their mothers, brothers, or sisters. One woman stated: "My husband was not supportive of my education because no one was educated in his family, but after the death of my mother-in-law, and with older children, he supported me" (T\_I8). Hence, a woman's ability to make decisions on her own account depends on a number of factors which influence her standing within the family, as well as her age and position in the household, and the household structure.

Nevertheless, women can gain influence by increasingly handling cash, extending social networks by communicating with people unknown before, or deciding on growing particular crops. This is not to say that women have not influenced these decisions before, but in many cases, their influence in these decisions increases, and for female-headed households, these decisions are now often taken alone. This has far-reaching effects on their mobility and time used, and how earlier constraints in everyday life shift to new struggles, but new opportunities to gain influence also arise.

Gendered subjectivities are particularly shifting over handling and controlling cash and remittances within the household. Unless in-laws or older sons are in the house to keep the money, most women with out-migrated husbands now keep the money themselves. As one woman stated: "Via phone my husband suggests how to spend money, but I am free to spend, as I know the needs better, and he agrees, as I am here on the ground" (T\_I1). Another male participant in a focus group discussion said: "The wife is our 'ministry' – she gives money to the husband, and the husband withdraws money from her" (T\_FGD1, male). Women are perceived as being able to save money, unlike men who gamble and spend money more easily. These shifts in gendered subjectivities of being able to keep and decide on finances are induced by an absent family member. This generates opportunities for husbands and wives to understand change in each other's capacities and limitations. Still, others stated that major expenses are often undertaken by husbands, or with their husbands' agreements via mobile phones. This recreates old communication patterns between husbands and wives via a new technology. Through mobile phones, husbands continue to consult or make major strategic decisions, e.g. on buying agricultural inputs. The mobile phone can also be a tool to control where particular women are at specific moments.

Increasing one's spatial and social mobility can challenge gender norms and promote confidence in being able to gain influence. However,

despite men's out-migration and shifting gendered subjectivities within the household, power relationships remain as women continue to be excluded from local decision-making bodies due to persisting gender norms regarding leadership, with the argument that it is the male's job. For example, in Koiladi in the Terai, women are not allowed to speak in front of the informal village heads who are a group of elderly men, but their husbands or fathers have to articulate their request instead. If women tried to speak, they could even be beaten. Women mentioned interest in participating in meetings, but only if other women were joining. They feel shy about participating alone, as they do not have information on government programs. Despite her leadership qualities, one woman stated that she was not accepted in her formal position as local leader because of her gender:

"If women are heading a group, she will face problems, people will comment because of her sex: she is female, so she is not a good leader, no matter how good her work is" (T\_FGD3)

Women elected as ward members in Baghwatipur, Bihar, were reported as having little influence themselves, and it is their husbands' interests which are brought forward in meetings. This further contributes to reinforcing women's limited ability to influence community decision-making meaningfully:

"Ward members are 80% female, they are supposed to be present, but their husbands attend meetings when they don't have to sign ... Women are instrumentalized by their husbands to gain more influence. Some women shed bad light on women in general as people think they are useless" (B\_FGD2, men)

If women approach the Panchayat,<sup>5</sup> they do not get heard, as stated in Dholaguri, West Bengal: "If women ask Panchayat leaders, she is wrong: Why do you talk? Other women do not talk!" It is perceived to be the men's job to approach the Panchayat, and women are yet to be able to influence the Panchayat. Influence in community decisions is perceived as "not possible due to powerful male Panchayat leaders", and that "poor people don't voice and come upfront" (WB\_I8). Farmers indicated that there is no proper development, because these "leaders only follow their own interests" (WB\_FGD 4) and do not improve communities. Given these already challenging circumstances for particularly poor farmers, if there is a reason to go to the Panchayat, for example, to place a request for the 100-day work scheme, the husband would mostly go (WB\_I6).

These examples demonstrate that some gendered struggles are changing more easily than others. For example, while it seems a common phenomenon to hand over cash and financial decision-making to women, changes in tenure are less likely. Shifts in labor allocation are also common, but engagement at the village level in the form of speaking up or increasing one's mobility may not easily follow. Particular market access and bargaining is challenging for many women. This means that some changes are not indicative of structural shifts and a weakening of gendered inequalities – rather, existing inequalities can be further reinforced, or just shifted to a new realm. Hence it is helpful to unpack shifts in influence in diverse social relations, rather than focusing on decision-making alone.

Differences and quarrels among women in villages are important to stress within the 'Feminization of Agriculture' debate to avoid the expectation of women's collective interests. Women find it difficult to group with each other as "everyone has a different mindset" (CB\_FGD3), and nowadays, "women do not come together" (WB\_I7). Particularly those who own land dominate tenants and wage laborers, and one woman in Bihar explains:

"There is no unity amongst women in the village, there are disparities for rich and poor, caste, religion, so I have friends in my own caste only" (B\_I8)

Yet again, an intersectional perspective considering land ownership and class is important to avoid homogenizing women as equally affected by male out-migration. Reasons for heterogeneous community relations include great variations in workload and income, and belonging to different political parties. In West Bengal, the latter helped some receive government support such as Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, whereas others did not. The unequal distribution of government subsidies and development projects within the village is also due to "rich leaders claiming and receiving help from the government" (WB\_FGD 3).

An interesting contrast to these perceptions is the village of Bhagwatipur in Bihar, in which the NGO has been active with social mobilization through self-help groups for nearly 20 years. In contrast to earlier statements on the dependence on husbands, the women described having the "we" feeling and that they can rely on their neighbors in cases of emergency. They reported that, while women have always been primarily responsible for reproductive tasks alongside agricultural labor and management, they increasingly act within spaces which previously were men's responsibility, such as income generating labor and community leadership. Whether there are emerging spaces to gain influence, as is the case among women in Bhagwatipur, or whether spaces of influence are closing down, as in Koiladi in Nepal's Eastern Terai, these are collective, yet contradictory and ambivalent shifts of influence going far beyond sex-disaggregated data on decision-making.

Women may not have more influence than prior to out-migration. When remittances are limited and intermittently received, the money is often used to pay back the loan used to migrate in the first place, and to cover immediate, daily needs such as educational support for children. Hence, while women might handle cash which they have not done before, the range of influence regarding what to invest in is perceived as limited, and adds additional worries. This also demonstrates how closely connected their experience of this extended influence is to material restrictions in terms of finances or land ownership which already existed prior to migration. Existing struggles in agriculture are transferred to all household members; for example, insufficient irrigation, low quality seeds or poor market prices. The so-called "left behind" population now carries the burden of dealing with ecological shocks such as droughts and floods by themselves, which leaves them highly dependent on receiving regular remittances.

The size of land owned influences the relationship female farmers have with each other. When a widow and a wife of a larger land-owning farmer were asked whether they know about community issues, they answered no, as "everyone has different problems" (WB\_I2). The daughter of a larger land-owning farmer (10 bighas) reported not spending much time with other women in the community or joining self-help groups as she already had economic security (WB\_I12). This may indicate culturally entrenched reservations towards other women in the village, particularly of those with knowledge and access to power and resources through economically better off husbands. Direct neighborhood support amongst neighbors with similar socio-economic backgrounds seems to be in place, as several women stated their direct neighbors would help them if their husbands migrated. Sometimes women meet to gossip in the evening, but mostly they are busy with their work and do not find time to spend in the community. The wife of a smaller land-owning farmer stated, "I am a woman, it is my work burden and it is not necessary to join the group" (WB\_I9). This indicates that women internalize the heavy expectations towards their workload and also may not see the positive effects of forming women's or community groups to be able to influence decisions at the village level.

The amount of land of a household is very important as it reflects the class status of the whole household, and its food and economic security. This is reflected in the general perceptions of villagers that "only if you have enough land, you can raise a family" (WB\_I1). An earlier study from

<sup>5</sup> Panchayat is the locally elected self-government of villages.



Madhubani and Saptari showed that land ownership has not changed for the majority of households since the migration of a family member (Sugden et al., 2015). Several households even sold land to fund migration in the first place and settle debts, creating further hardship for women and their families left behind. To ensure food security while husbands are away, some women reportedly take land on lease.

Male out-migration is less likely to cause shifts in land ownership, but the absence of men can cause struggles and insecurity. Whether women themselves are the actual title holders of the land can have a significant impact on their access to subsidies, credit, agricultural inputs and extension services, as these are closely linked to landownership certificates. Land is usually owned in the name of the husband or father-in-law. If women want to leave their husband or their husband leaves or dies, they are at increased risk of becoming vulnerable. One particular worry of an elderly woman is being at the mercy of her out-migrated sons and other male family members when her husband dies, as then the land will be divided amongst the sons, and other male family members could also take advantage and claim land ownership (B\_FGD9). She already approached her out-migrated male family members to give her the land, but they did not agree. But, while her husband lives, “no one will ask for anything” (B\_FGD9). This demonstrates the dependence of women on their husbands, and after their deaths, on other male family members, and thus illustrates their limited long-term security from benefitting from the work they invest in the land. In this case, owning the land would have given the woman security and the independence to work on the field for all her life, which seemed very relevant to her.

Furthermore, land rights in themselves will not transform women’s lives, as they need to be effective, and not only nominal. The ownership of land is of strategic importance, but needs to be supported through access to credit, inputs, technical information, infrastructure etc. As well as shifts in power balances within the household, the village and the market and in some areas at the state level. This, of course, will vary with the size of land, and women with husbands owning larger plots are economically better off than women owning a small plot in their name. Yet, shifts in women’s influence need to be unpacked by looking at whether or not power relations in diverse dimensions have changed.

## 7. Shifting aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination

Aspirations and feelings of insecurity associated with the absence of men are deeply intertwined, and an important but underexplored aspect in research on rural out-migration, gender relations and well-being. Since male out-migration leads to mixed feelings and different degrees of self-determination which influence farming decisions, this complexity cannot be captured under an agricultural productivity framing alone, examining whether income increased or land is left fallow, on which much of the literature has focused. In the process of taking over additional farm labor and farm management, women farmers’ subjectivities shift as they become more conscious about their capacities to earn and engage with others, but also their limitations, as they are dependent on others to irrigate and cultivate land. At the same time, their husbands’ absence can cause everyday distress about being able to cultivate and care for their families alone. While some women perceived migration positively for their self-determination and enjoy greater mobility, others feel insecure in dealing with “male tasks”, e.g. being overcharged for agricultural inputs due to a lack of knowledge and bargaining power, as well as some worry about their own and their husband’s security. Such perceptions are important for exploring underlying reasons for farming decisions, which I examined in 21 focus group discussions. Importantly, the benefits and challenges mentioned by the farmers are intertwined and co-produced.

Several women reported increased self-determination in the absence of their husbands. “When husbands migrate, we are free” (WB\_FDG 4), stated one woman in Dholaguri, West Bengal, referring to having more

time and spatial mobility in her husband’s absence. She reported having less work by not washing and cooking for her husband. Another woman indicated that she cooks three times a day when her husband is there, as he requests this, but only twice when she is alone with her two children. Another woman reported mental and physical relief: “We have a lower work load when the husband is gone because we don’t need to prepare food for him, we think less and have less heavy work, only our own work and the children” (WB\_FDG 3). Another woman mentioned feeling more trapped in the house when her husband is around. Several women implied that their husbands are a burden when they do not work or do anything at home or for the children. This was particularly the case in households where alcoholism and strong patriarchal relations were present. One woman stated that she now can go to the bank and to the market, places where before only her husband went, but also with the advantage that she can stay outside as much as she wants since she does not live like others with her in-laws. This shows how some women are also self-determined to leave their primarily occupied domestic space and more frequently enter distant public spaces.

Dealing with people outside the village is challenging but makes them also feel more confident: “I realized I can earn money myself when my husband is out” (WB\_FDG 4). This demonstrates shifting subjectivities about the ability to earn and provide financial security along managing a household and farm labor by themselves. As men’s absence requires more decision-making from women on agriculture and livestock, they stated feeling more confident. Women stated that they work more productively in general, as they cannot rely on the remittances of the husband. One effect of migration is that women become mostly wage laborers in the village when their husbands are gone. Therefore, there is a shift among wage laborers in that increasingly women take these jobs. With the money at hand, they felt financially more self-determined.

While a younger woman openly aspired to have more influence in the future, an elder woman noted “I have had hope, but at that time I have died” (BD\_FGD). This shows that the younger generation of women expects change, possibly because they are more likely to be educated, or because they feel more self-determined than their mothers and even more so than their grandmothers.

Contrastingly, a range of perceived challenges are co-produced by these perceived benefits. There is also negative emotional stress and feelings of insecurity associated with the absence of men. Women worry about their husbands and the pressure to sustain themselves and their children alone. These experiences depend on the amount and interval of remittances received, as they determine the ability to hire laborers, rent out land or abandon particular labor-intensive and water-intensive crops, such as rice, and buy rice instead. Women also stated feeling alone and worried about their out-migrated husband’s security, e.g. that he could have an accident (WB\_I1). Although they reported no harassment, a woman described not “[feeling] good alone” (WB\_I1). Low self-determination is reinforced when women are perceived as dependent and inexperienced farmers.

Some women showed a strong awareness of their limitations to advise their husbands on farming due to gendered perceptions of their knowledge. Even if women are conscious that they have knowledge, this will not be accepted because of their gender. In Koiladi, Nepal’s Eastern Terai, one woman stated, “husbands cannot accept all what women say because they don’t want to be below women” (T\_FGD3). In this way, women’s voices are silenced despite their knowledge. Similarly, women stated that “Women work in the field like men, but are not empowered” (T\_I7). They perceive a gap despite their skills and knowledge and state their perceived injustices due to their gender, but they could not change these. Here, women’s increased awareness contrasts with reinforced power relations.

Aspirations are turning away from farming. Due to continuing gendered access to water and other agricultural resources, some women stated seeing it as their duty – and not their aspiration or choice – to continue farming in the absence of their husbands. Some women in Dholaguri, West Bengal, felt it was a compulsion to work as farmers on

the land. They feel like a “substitute farmer” or “second class farmer”, while men are perceived as the “real farmer”. Even though women might have increased influence by being more outspoken, increased decision-making power or responsibilities, men still see women as second-class farmers. This reinforces low self-confidence which may further inhibit women’s self-determination. One striking example was that demands for owning land were usually not voiced by women in the sites. Women noted that neither men nor women themselves raise the question or criticize whether land should be in a woman’s name. One reason mentioned is that they can rely on their husbands to take care of them: “We do not need to raise the question of whom belongs the land, because our husbands earn money and give us clothes and food” (WB\_FGD3). This indicates that there is a gap between women’s aspirations, the feeling of being in the right place, and the spaces they enter in.

When women were openly asked which support they aspire to, they said they would like to work from home, instead of in the fields, and make, for example, candle stakes. This demonstrates that more benefits are seen from other more comfortable, creative work than agriculture. Through remittances and the exposure to consumerist items, new perceptions and a new confidence to dream arise. This involves turning away from farming: “Being a farmer seemed better than education, but now the perception of society changes: Education is better than farming” (B\_I1, I4). This indicates shifting subjectivities of being a female farmer, and the aspiration to become educated. Another woman perceived working on the field in the sun as degrading the skin and thus leading to lower beauty (WB\_I8). As the women stated, she is looked down upon by her sisters-in-law, who are not farming and stay inside, so their skin does not turn dark, and become wrinkled and cracked. This demonstrates that female farmers perceive working on the land as harmful to women’s dignity, which is strongly linked to young, attractive looks.

Discriminatory gender norms not only affect women’s aspirations, but also men. A young girl questioned in a focus group discussion in the village of Khoksar Parbaha in the Terai: “Why do men not cook?” The answer of older women hinted at the fear of men of engaging with a task which is attributed to the female domain, and being called such: “If husbands cook, they are called womanish” (T\_FGD2), using the word “janani” in the local language Maithili. This indicates that challenging the gender rules on the division of labor would most likely be avoided because of a fear of stigmatization. If, however, someone dares to threaten the gendered division of labor, and enter the opposite gender domain, it may also provide an opportunity for both women and men to experience contradictions and question their own perceptions and aspirations, and a critical awareness arises.

Particular aspirations, tasks and personal characteristics align to gender norms. While women are portrayed by men in focus group discussions as inexperienced, dependent and accepting, men perceived themselves as experienced and knowledgeable. This is also reproduced by women themselves. When, for example, one woman was pointing out her limitations to engage in economic activities as she could not count, other women participating in the focus group discussions in Koiladi (Terai) were laughing: “Don’t worry, if you can’t count money, your husband will take care” (T\_FGD2). This shows a positive perception of the existing co-dependence of husband and wife for life skills and support. Gendered relations are not questioned openly, but the clear role allocation of husband and wife seemed to provide a complementary and comfortable unit.

## 8. Conclusion: Emerging spaces of influence and persistent gendered exclusions in agriculture (1227)

The empirical data demonstrates that male out-migration has complex effects on small-scale farming and gender relations in agriculture. Against this background, I suggest to refine the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ debate beyond agricultural productivity and agency framings which rely solely on sex-disaggregated differences in decision-making, labor roles and resource ownership, and formal access to resources.

The proposed framework addresses the limitations of the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’ in current analyses of migration and gender which oversimplify complex and shifting social relations. The findings demonstrate how gender norms and power relations shape socio-spatial struggles over resources, influence in agrarian households and communal spaces, and aspirations (cf. Table 1). I demonstrated how in contexts of out-migration, gendered subjectivities, agricultural practices and struggles over resource access are shifting and shaped by relations of caste, class and age. Documenting diversely situated (female) farmers’ struggles can contribute to taking every-day experiences into account of what has broadly been referred to as ‘Feminization of Agriculture’. The dynamic interplay of gender norms and power relations shapes access to and control over resources, and I argue for the need for more intersectional gender analyses and careful use and unpacking of terminologies.

The narratives of a ‘Feminization of Agriculture’, and the assumption that men’s absence can lead to either women’s empowerment or vulnerability needs to engage with the complex social relations among women and men. To effectively challenge the Feminization of Agriculture’ as generic concept, a single case study may not be sufficient as gender relations in agriculture vary within and across diverse geographic, social, cultural, economic and demographic contexts. Therefore, more studies critically examining the concept in other geographic and cultural settings and with other approaches are needed. My empirical data leads us beyond questioning gendered labor and decision-making roles. Implications for analyses are that only through a relational and intersectional analysis of changing gender norms and power relations, diverse facets of social and agrarian changes associated with out-migration can be understood. So far, changes in critical awareness and gender norms, and how these affect agricultural practices, are not well documented. This is, however, relevant when we refer to the broad term of ‘Feminization of Agriculture’.

The framework draws attention to emerging spaces of influence and persistent marginalization in gendered everyday struggles within agrarian households and communal spaces. Based on the empirical

**Table 1**  
Diverse perceptions on out-migration from six sites based on focus group discussions and interviews.

	Perceived benefits	Perceived challenges
Socio-spatial struggles over resources	Some women could rent additional land, buy shallow tubewells and diesel pump sets to improve water access. Income and remittances help to pay basic household expenses, to repay loans and medical expenses. Women increase their mobility and negotiate with neighbors and pump owners more confidently.	Women are overcharged for agricultural inputs, as they, unlike their husbands, do not know the prices, lack bargaining power and do not have the same networks as men. Workload has increased during agricultural peak seasons, e.g. husbands used to purchase agricultural inputs and arrange plowing.
Influence in agrarian households and communal spaces	Women do not feel shy speaking to strangers anymore, they have become active (“I realized I can earn money myself when my husband is out”). Greater influence in household decision-making dependent on position and presence of in-laws.	Women receive less information, e.g. on government projects, as husband is the source person and attended meetings. Shifts in land tenure remain rare, and access to agricultural inputs, credit, extension services is gendered.
Aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination	Increased self-determination in regard to finances, mobility, and work load. (“When husbands migrate, we are free”).	Women feel insecure and lonely, and worry about their own, family’s and husband’s security. Feel treated like second-class farmers by husbands, government officials, and in markets.

evidence of five years, positive change towards greater justice is most likely to increase through strengthening collective action and gender-sensitive land, water and agricultural institutions which could avoid e.g. that women ask repeatedly for water, or pay higher prices than men (Agarwal, 2019; Sugden et al., 2020; Leder et al., 2019). What really matters in gender and agriculture research and development practice is to understand how gender norms and power relations affect agricultural practices. These are the three key take home points on what this means conceptually, and how we think of the ‘Feminization of Agriculture’:

Firstly, gender norms are both changing and reinforcing inequalities – so the overall picture is complex, and linear conclusions on the effects of rural out-migration could be fallacious. While there is a transfer of responsibility for some with an increased workload, there is a further withdrawal from the public for others. While some feel more confident, others feel insecure and lonely. While some proudly state happily being a female farmer, others perceive it as their duty and compulsion. While access to public spaces becomes more common, this can also highlight limitations in terms of knowledge, information and networks in comparison to men. These gender differences are important to conceptualize and explore as everyday struggles. These shifting power relations are not just a question of gender. New intra and inter-household dependencies for managing water and land resources depend on a range of intersecting relations such as age, class (landownership and remittances), caste, household position and composition, and migration status. Therefore, an intersectional and processual analysis is needed to do justice to complex social relations in agriculture.

Secondly, aspirations and feelings of insecurity are closely intertwined with shifting everyday struggles over resources and influence are important themes to study in a diversity of contexts. The findings demonstrate that there is a gap between women’s aspirations, feelings of being at the right place and the new spaces they enter. Although there is an increased critical awareness of gender norms due to increased public exposure, personal agency remains limited as gender norms affect and limit agricultural practices. Out-migration may lead to women critically realizing the existing gendered division of labor, the restrictions they are facing, as well as becoming aware of their agency, but also their limitations due to gender norms. Hence it is important to analyze the persistence of gender norms and power relations, and its new, but reproduced forms, e.g. when the mother-in-law becomes the authoritative figure in the household. Women’s existing critical awareness of the gendered division of labor and linked restricted mobility and control over agricultural inputs does not transfer into greater self-determination, which is also linked to the need to continue aligning to social recognition and norms.

Thirdly, contradictory outcomes regarding agricultural practices in the context of male out-migration can be identified and explained with an analysis of the three dimensions of the framework. These explore shifts in (1) socio-spatial struggles over resources, (2) influence in agrarian households and communal spaces, and (3) aspirations, feelings of insecurity and self-determination from the perspective of gendered subjectivities (cf. Table 1). Unpacking these dimensions moves analyses beyond simplistic outcomes on either women’s empowerment or vulnerability. Gender norms and power relations are ambivalent, and both change and reinforce inequalities in agricultural practices such as access to irrigation, or making decisions on cultivation. For some women, new spaces of influence and exclusion – sometimes even at the same time – emerge, as they move into a domain which was previously reserved for the male. On the one hand, there may be increased influence in agrarian households and communal spaces for some women, while on the other hand, aspirations turn away from farming.

The major implication from the findings and the framework is to think of gender as power relations, and not categories. Gender differences are important to conceptualize and study as everyday struggles, which may or may not change over time. Intersectionality means not only measuring sex-differentiated impacts, but also studying household relations, the position in the household and in the village, and taking

age, class, ethnicity and other differentiations into account. A relational approach to gender asks how out-migration opens up or closes down new spaces for women (and men) to influence, move, and act. Such a processual understanding of migration-induced dynamics of gendered labor relations and agrarian change can help to better design targeted agricultural research, development interventions and policies to address diverse farmers’ needs in contexts of out-migration. This will presumably improve female and male farmers’ perceptions of women as substitute or second-class farmers, and also lead to more influence in land and water access and other agricultural inputs at the household, village, regional and national level.

Increased knowledge and skills regarding gender relations and their impacts on agriculture and resource management can lead to greater critical awareness and the will to change (Buisson et al. forthcoming). Institutionalized groups in which women can collectively exchange and demand their rights, increase their bargaining power (Sugden et al., 2020), and thus create more opportunities to choose from, can help overcome everyday struggles over resources and lead to greater feelings of security and self-determination.

#### Author statement

Stephanie Leder wrote the paper as sole author (conceptualization, methodology, writing and review).

#### Declaration of competing interest

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