

Women's Resource Access Programme (WRAP)
Voices from the Field

“Women's Access to Land and Other Natural Resources in India”
A series of five workshops conducted with poor rural villagers in
Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh
September-December 2001

Listening and Learning:

Women's Access to Land and Other Natural Resources in India

“It is ironic that those who are the food producers, largely farm labourers, are among those most vulnerable to food insecurity. For the rural poor, secure access to land provides the most realistic opportunity for rural people to improve their livelihoods and develop assets that can improve their resilience to shocks.”¹

Introduction

How do the rural poor, and especially women, use and value land and other natural resources? How do they benefit from them? What processes of empowerment evolve when women's access to and control over these resources are increased and improved?

The Women's Resource Access Programme (WRAP), a special programme of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, set out to explore these issues in a number of poor rural communities and villages in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India. One of the Popular Coalition's partners in India, the Social Development Foundation (SDF), organized five community workshops.

In most of these communities, some households have land in the husband's name, and occasionally women have title to land, either through inheritance or following their participation in the state sterilization programmes carried out several years ago. Some households that participated in the community workshop in Madhya Pradesh also have legal rights of access to nearby forest areas, where they are allowed to collect forest fruits and fallen firewood and harvest the naturally growing grasses. The reason they can do so is because they are members of a particular group entitled to this right in this particular state (in their case, the Kol tribal group, one of the so-called Scheduled Tribes).

But for the most part, the women who participated in the WRAP community workshops do not own land and do not have legal access rights to forest areas. The only access to land for most is through sharecropping, and for some, as we shall see, even sharecropping is not an option. Instead, they are either agricultural workers or work in the non-farm sector.

¹ Ghimire, Krishna B. (ed.). *Whose Land? Civil Society Perspectives on Land Reform and Rural Poverty Reduction: Regional Experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and IFAD, 2001.

WRAP did not set out to analyse the differences in quality of life between those with land or access to forests and those without. Rather, it sought to provide a forum for all of the rural women present, and to listen with empathy as they spoke about their daily lives and what the land and forests mean to them.

“I hope that you continue these workshops, which have given me a great sense of achievement and a hope for the future. Never before have I had such a feeling of equality and of sharing of my joys and sorrows with someone from the outside. Today, I am overwhelmed.” – participant in one of the WRAP workshops²

Such a community-level approach is not revolutionary, and it is certainly not new in India. At the same time, there has historically been a gap in the literature and knowledge base relating to how the rural poor, and especially women, use and value land. WRAP attempts to close this gap by giving voice to poor rural women in order to test and deepen our understanding of what land and other natural resources signify for them. After all, the perceptions and experiences of these women comprise their reality; and it is from their reality that they and their communities, together with the range of institutions that assist them, can discern and create opportunities. In essence, WRAP’s focus can be captured by the three words that lie at the heart of the Popular Coalition’s mission: giving *voice*, *visibility* and *opportunity* to the rural poor.

Before we share the perceptions and experiences of these women, however, it is important that we provide basic information about the status of women in the areas that WRAP visited and some background to each of the workshops.

About WRAP

Launched in 2001, the Women’s Resource Access Programme (WRAP) is a specialized programme of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty. It is funded through Japan’s contribution to IFAD’s Women in Development trust fund.

WRAP provides a tool for listening to and documenting the views and opinions of poor rural women on the value and importance of secure access to land and other natural resources. In this way, WRAP helps to raise international understanding, particularly among policy-makers, of the need to improve women’s access to these resources. It also provides development practitioners with a rapid, effective and low-cost participatory tool for incorporating poor women’s voices in project identification, design, implementation and evaluation.

² The quotations in this document are the words of women participating in one of the five workshops conducted in India.

The WRAP approach is built around a series of small community workshops that offer a forum for listening to the views and perceptions of poor community women on a range of selected resource-access issues. To create a suitable forum, WRAP keeps external participation to a minimum, and holds workshops in the fields and forests where the women work and not in the formal meeting sites that so often inhibit participants from speaking openly and candidly. Typically WRAP community workshops take place over three days. The first two days are spent with the community women in their fields and forests. Experience has shown that moving between different locations and settings over the two days leads to richer discussions. The final day's meeting is best held away from the community. The aim is to review, summarize and synthesize the findings of the previous two days. Some women from the community should participate in this last meeting in order to validate, confirm or explain findings.

The WRAP process is driven by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) partner of the Popular Coalition. WRAP selects this partner on the basis of its strong links with communities in the area and its knowledge and understanding of the resource-access issues that affect the rural poor. The NGO is responsible for identifying communities and helping participants to understand the purpose and nature of the WRAP workshops. Typically, the first WRAP workshop is slightly larger than the following ones and may involve a limited number of external participants. In most cases, the national NGO partner organizes additional WRAP workshops in different communities in order to broaden and deepen understanding. The follow-up workshops are normally smaller in size and tend not to involve participants from outside the area. Where possible, the national NGO partner is encouraged to involve women from the earlier workshops in subsequent meetings.

WRAP is built upon the same principle of active partnership that infuses all Popular Coalition activities. Community workshops involve a range of partners. Each partner contributes to the success of the process. These contributions include the time and knowledge of the community women themselves, the skills and experiences of local community-based civil-society organizations, the technical knowledge of government officials (where appropriate), and the knowledge, experience and reporting skills of different national and international civil-society and other organizations. The documentation process is based on the principle of open and transparent exchange, leading to outputs that reflect the contributions of all participants.

In 2001, nine WRAP workshops were held in Nepal and India. New workshops are planned for Cambodia, Indonesia and elsewhere in the region in 2002 and early 2003.

Methodological guidelines and additional WRAP documents are available from the Popular Coalition.

For further information about WRAP, contact Richard Trenchard at the Popular Coalition at: r.trenchard@ifad.org.

Rural Dalit and Tribal Women in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh

Tribal and dalit³ groups are found throughout Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. They live in the villages of the plains and hills, and near the many forest areas. Many of their communities are not easily accessible because of the difficult terrain and poor and periodically impassable roads. The isolation of these people is also exacerbated by inadequate communications services. While being ‘cut off’ has contributed, in part, to the tribals’ ability to preserve their distinct identities, it has also accentuated many of the conditions that create and perpetuate poverty.

In many parts of rural India, the lives of dalit and tribal women are characterized by profound social exclusion and deep-seated economic and political marginalization. They have few economic rights, rank low in the social hierarchy and have very little access to political institutions. For the majority, agricultural labour and/or sharecropping are the main sources of livelihood. These livelihood options also represent cruel expressions of their wholesale exclusion. Women are underpaid for their labour, and at times they are not paid at all. We learned that they are sometimes forced to work additional hours in the fields or the homes of their paymasters. And they are frequently denied their ‘share’ of the agricultural output of the fields they farm as sharecroppers. To make matters worse, there are countless tales of rape and physical abuse. Most of these women, it seems, cannot enjoy a return on the one asset they control – their labour. Instead, they are forced to accept the unjust rules of a highly unfair game in a deeply unequal society.

The Indian Constitution seeks to protect the dalits and tribals by providing various forms of affirmative action – for example, political representation in Parliament and the state assemblies, and employment opportunities in government services. In addition, legislation exists to prevent outsiders from acquiring land in tribal areas. In many cases, tribal communities are granted access rights to forest reserves so that they can gather or harvest selected timber and non-timber forest products. Many tribal women spend their days primarily in the forest, where they collect fuel wood, herbs and leaves. They dry and roll the leaves to make *bedi* cigarettes, which they then sell at the market, arriving on foot.

The distinction between dalit and tribal women in this area is well illustrated by the two different predominantly Kol communities in which the first WRAP community workshops took place. The first community is in Uttar Pradesh; the second, a few kilometres away over the state border in Madhya Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh, the Kol community is classified as tribal and is granted some access to forest reserves. In Uttar Pradesh, the community is classified as dalit (Scheduled Caste) and is not entitled to harvest forest products. In the context of the WRAP workshops, the differences in the views, perceptions and attitudes expressed by the Kol community women from two different states was striking and provided dramatic insights into the role and importance of land – in this case forests – in poor rural women’s lives.

³ Dalit refers to a historically marginalized people belonging to the lowest levels of the Hindu religious caste system. Although ‘castes’ are now illegal, many people continue to suffer discrimination because of the system.

Since so many women – regardless of their status as tribals or dalits – come from households that do not own or have direct access to land, the primary focus of the workshops was to listen to these landless women speak about the daily hardships they face and the benefits that they perceive would result from having secure access to land.

Working in Partnership

WRAP is a programme of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty. All of WRAP's activities are carried out with a range of national and international partners. The WRAP workshops that took place in 2001 in India involved the following partners:

Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty

The Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty was established in 1996. It is a global consortium of intergovernmental, civil-society and bilateral organizations with the specific mandate to empower the rural poor by improving their access to productive assets, including land and other natural resources.

For further information on the Popular Coalition and its programmes, contact Bruce Moore, Coordinator, at: b.moore@ifad.org.

International Fund for Agricultural Development

IFAD is a specialized agency of the United Nations. It was established in 1977 with a mandate to combat rural hunger and poverty in developing countries. The Fund's target groups are the poorest of the world's people: small farmers, the rural landless, nomadic pastoralists, artisanal fishermen and -women, indigenous people and, across all groups, poor rural women. In this context, IFAD provides direct funding and mobilizes additional resources for programmes designed specifically to enable the poor to overcome their poverty. This goal is built on the recognition that poverty reduction is not something that governments, development institutions or NGOs can do for the poor. They can forge partnerships and help to promote the conditions in which the poor can use their own skills and talents to work their way out of poverty.

For information on IFAD's programme in Asia, contact Phrang Roy, Director, Asia and the Pacific Division, at: p.roy@ifad.org.

Social Development Foundation (SDF)

SDF links a number of activists and NGOs working to defend and strengthen the land rights of dalits and tribals in Uttar Pradesh and surrounding areas of India. It is involved in community-based activities directed at increasing the capacity of marginalized communities to understand their rights and to make effective demands for them at local, regional and national levels. SDF has initiated training programmes such as land-literacy workshops in various parts of Uttar Pradesh. Since 1998, SDF has also been one of the Popular Coalition's national nodes in India as part of its Agrarian Reform Knowledge Network (ARnet). In this role, SDF aims to create a rural information resource centre to help its partners and other grass-roots community-based organizations to acquire knowledge and create links with other national and international initiatives.

For further information about SDF, contact V. B. Rawat, Director, at: vbrawat@vsnl.com.

Amar Shaheed Chtana Sansthan

A partner organization of SDF, working in Deoria and Mau districts (Sansthan), Amar Shaheed Chtana Sansthan trains *panchayat* (village council) representatives and organizes training programmes for women's empowerment, in addition to its other initiatives.

For further information, contact V. B. Rawat, Director, SDF, at: vbrawat@vsnl.com

Chitrakoot Sewa Ashram

A partner organization of SDF, working in Chitrakoot among the Kol tribals and dalits of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, Chitrakoot Sewa Ashram focuses on training rural women and unemployed youth, and supporting their land rights.

For further information, contact V. B. Rawat, Director, SDF, at: vbrawat@vsnl.com

Navchetan Sansthan

A partner organization of SDF, working in Bujhia village of Bahraich district (bordering Nepal), Navchetan works with dalit women and the Tharu tribal community, and also focuses on the elderly.

For further information, contact V. B. Rawat, Director, SDF, at: vbrawat@vsnl.com

Sambhavana

A local partner of SDF in the town of Gangoh in Saharanpur district (Western Uttar Pradesh), Sambhavana works primarily with women. In addition to the WRAP workshop in Gangoh, it has organized various human rights training workshops.

For further information, contact V. B. Rawat, Director, SDF, at: vbrawat@vsnl.com

Mobilization and Development – Nepal

A local development NGO, Mobilization and Development-Nepal (Mode-Nepal) focuses its overall development efforts on bottom-up, integrated actions to promote – primarily through awareness-building – education, employment, health, sanitation and participation in self-help activities. It endeavours to adopt and institutionalize a holistic and participatory approach that involves individuals, their grass-roots organizations and the Government in enhancing the quality of life and sustainable development of the country. Since 1998, Mode-Nepal has also been the national node for the Popular Coalition's Knowledge Network on Agrarian Reform (ARnet).

For information on Mode-Nepal, contact Bharat Shrestha, Director, Mode-Nepal, at: mode@mail.com.np.

Indonesian Institute for Forest and Environment (RMI)

Founded in 1992, RMI is a non-profit organization that aims to promote natural resource conservation in Indonesia by conducting research and field action-programmes related to the protection, preservation and use of natural resources for community prosperity. It promotes participatory, community-based natural resource management and environmental education programmes.

For information on the involvement of RMI with WRAP, contact Ulfa Hidayati at: rmi@bgor.wasantara.net.id

Jeannette D. Gurung

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The Workshops**Workshop I**

The first WRAP workshop took place from 15 to 17 September 2001. On the first day, about 30 dalit women from the Kol community of Chitrakoot district (Uttar Pradesh) participated. Chitrakoot is one of the most underdeveloped districts of Uttar Pradesh. Many tribal areas in the district lack sanitation, water, health or education facilities. In recent years, SDF and its partner organizations have conducted a series of 'land-literacy' workshops⁴ in the region to increase women's awareness of their rights.

On the second day, about 10 tribal women from the Kol community of Satna district (Madhya Pradesh) participated. Unlike their counterparts in Chitrakoot, the tribal women in Satna district have access to the forests, and in recent years, local NGOs have also encouraged them to form self-help groups.

The third day brought the two groups of women together and ended with a cultural programme in which the women sang folk songs and danced traditional dances.

Workshop II

The second WRAP workshop took place from 12 to 13 October 2001. Some 20 dalit women from different blocks of Deoria district (Uttar Pradesh) participated in the workshop. Deoria lies in the sugar-cane belt of eastern Uttar Pradesh, providing most of the women in the workshops with employment as agricultural labourers. The women are also engaged in a number of off-farm activities, including weaving, ironwork and carpentry. However, most of the women have no land of their own, and the few who do are fighting to hold on to it.

Workshop III

The third WRAP workshop took place from 22 to 23 October 2001, and involved women from two different villages of Bahraich district (Uttar Pradesh) – about 50 dalit women from the village of Bujhia on the first day and some 30 Tharu tribal women from the village of Dharmapur on the second. Bujhia lies about 5 km outside the forest area, and water and electricity are extremely scarce. With the help of SDF, many women in the

⁴ . Land-literacy workshops have been organized by SDF, which has developed this approach in consultation with local partner NGOs. The workshops seek to make marginal and vulnerable groups, in particular tribal groups and women, aware of their land rights and to give them practical tools and methods to claim and defend these rights. The approach, based on a combination of workshops, training and capacity-building of individuals, is driven by the experiences of the participants themselves. Additional information on this approach is available from the Secretariat of the Popular Coalition and SDF.

dalit community have organized themselves into small savings groups. Dharmapur lies very close to the forest area, but the dalit women do not have access to the forest land and its products.

Workshop IV

The fourth WRAP workshop took place from 18 to 19 December 2001, and involved women from different villages in Saharanpur district (Uttar Pradesh): about 30 dalit women from the village of Thola Fathepuri on the first day, and about 25 dalit and Muslim women from the village of Lucknouti on the second. Both villages are situated in India's sugar belt, but both have very limited infrastructure. Their populations are largely Muslim and dalit, and are characterized by high levels of illiteracy and extreme poverty.

Workshop V

The final WRAP workshop took place from 23 to 24 December 2001 in New Delhi. Among the 20 participants were several women who had participated in the community workshops. It was hoped that by bringing such a wide variety of women together, this final workshop would help participants to build and sustain a movement to promote the empowerment of their communities through secure access to natural resources.

Listening and Learning

“I want knowledge. I need these workshops so that I can equip myself better to fight for my rights.” – *Chanda*

The village is about 40 km from the railway station. The roads are heavily degraded and transport is infrequent. When the local buses finally arrive, they are already overflowing with people, luggage and bundles of every size and shape. We are lucky – we have a jeep. But still, it takes us almost six hours before the village comes into view. The women are busy in the fields. It is time for *katai*, harvesting the paddy crop. The women are so intent on their labour that they seem not to notice our approach. The field is dry and stony, and without irrigation. As we reach the rocky, hand-ploughed field, the women stand upright to stare at us. They are expecting us, as a local NGO that they know and trust has contacted them in advance, explained the nature of our visit and encouraged them to participate.

The women begin to gather round the jeep. Each seems eager to speak, or at least to listen to what the others are saying. We invite them to sit under an old banyan tree to talk. The tree's bark is smooth – the banyan has been used for generations as a place to meet or as a haven for those seeking shade and a moment of respite. Soon, some men and children appear near the group to observe. The momentum has begun, and the women continue to speak, each statement seeming both to kindle further enthusiasm and to dissolve whatever reluctance some may have had. Eventually, most of the men and children wander off.

Huddled in the shade of an ancient banyan tree amid dusty fields – this is a typical workshop 'venue'. There are no microphones, no round tables, no flip charts with coloured markers and no computers. In fact, the setting is always outdoors, in garden

plots, in the fields that the women sharecrop or where they work for a meagre daily wage, or in the forest areas that the women visit and use everyday. In this way, the lives and the resources that are being spoken about and the changes that are – or are not – taking place, become more palpable.

After there have been several hours of listening, talking and observing, themes begin to emerge. Some surface again and again, introduced by one participant and eagerly elaborated by another, and then another. Other themes are brought up by a lone voice, but one so emphatic that it cannot be discounted.

What do these women have to say?

Listening and Learning Dignity in the Community

“People in the village now know that I have land in my name, and they have tremendous respect for me.” – Lahani

Poor rural women in India consider land to be more than just a commodity. It is, they told us, their ‘motherland’, rich with social and symbolic value. The most common perception among the women was that owning land brings social security and dignity, which they value above all.

“Owning land would allow us all to escape from the bondage of sharecropping and exploitation.” – Champawati

“If I have land in my own name, then the exploitation will stop. Otherwise, everything is about *mazboori* (helplessness), and nobody will care.” – Ramwati Devi

Without legal rights or direct access to land or forests, many poor rural women are forced to engage in sharecropping or to work for a daily agricultural wage. For these women, sharecropping is not just a means of ensuring a livelihood. It is also a legitimized form of oppression, built on highly unequal relations of power between wealthy landlords and the poor tribals and dalits, who have few if any choices and are thus easily exploited. Conditions can be so harsh that many tribals and dalits seek to gain a minimum economic foothold by working in the forests, as they did in the past – often for generations. However, since work in forest areas is usually prohibited, often they must hide from Forest Department officials or make ‘unofficial payments’ for unauthorized use. Even though the returns are no higher than those from sharecropping, the women emphasized that in the forest they are free to work together and are not harassed and exploited.

In a country such as India, where landholding is strongly associated with dignity and respect, giving land to poor rural households, and in particular to poor women, provides more than just a sense of security. It confers power and prestige unlike any other factor in society, and helps to create the conditions that will enable these women to escape their poverty. Razia Khan, a 45-year-old woman from the village of Thola Fathepuri, was

given four *bighas* (less than 1 hectare (ha)) of land six years ago under a family planning scheme. Almost immediately, she noticed a change in the behaviour not only of her family, but also of the entire village. Villagers now consider her a successful agriculturist.

“If we had our own land, we would not have to work in anyone else’s fields. We would be able to feed ourselves.” – Champawati

The women we spoke to in Madhya Pradesh are fully entitled to harvest non-forest timber products. They spend most of their day in the forest, collecting fuel wood and other forest products. They then sell these products in the market, a good walk away. Most of the women admitted that they earned no more than they would from sharecropping or agricultural labour. However, they still preferred gathering and selling forest products to working as sharecroppers. Although the forestry work makes them dependent on the day-to-day sales of the products they gather, they at least receive the full benefits of their labour, as no one else is involved in, or dictating the terms of, their labour. A degree of autonomy has been created.

The women who own land – or who work on land owned by their families – are undoubtedly more respected in society. They are more engaged in the public affairs of their community and can interact more freely with others. The women attributed this to the self-confidence that they have gained, which is ultimately nurtured by the respect shown by their families and the other villagers. As one husband proudly said, “I would not be here without the hard work and constant support of my wife. I must say that women have the strength and the will to do so much, and their coming forward is a great event for our village.”

During the workshops, women with land or from land-owning households were highly visible. They spoke forcefully and articulately about how land has given them power and enabled them to manage their families better. The women whose access to land was being threatened by landlords or the Forest Department itself were most adamant about the importance of owning land. But even women who only have a small plot for vegetables say that having land has changed their lives.

“Land is our mother. And it is the women who work most of the time in the fields. So the land should be (registered) first in the name of women.” – Sahani

The struggle for land is difficult, but the struggle to hold on to land can be just as arduous. Take the case of Rehana Begum, who was allotted 12 *bighas* (about 2.4 ha) of land. The more fertile part of her land was encroached on, and when Rehana filed a case against the encroacher, he warned her to settle the case in his favour or face serious consequences. Two days later, she was attacked by a masked man while waiting for a bus. The attacker pulled up next to her on his motorcycle and asked her what she had decided. When Rehana refused to talk, he attacked her and fled. Rehana ran to the village to file a report about the attack and the threats that had led to it, but the police officer refused to process the report, which is not uncommon. Rehana has not given up in her

fight to reclaim her land. Her plight – as well as her self-confidence and determination – are typical of women who have land.

“We want to work for ourselves, for our own benefit and for our children’s benefit, not for the benefit of the landlord. We work, and they enjoy our food. They refuse to give us our full amount, but we cannot go to the authorities because they will side with the landowner.” – anonymous

The importance of women’s self-confidence and self-esteem in terms of community development cannot be overstated. As women come to feel comfortable speaking with men within the community, and with government representatives and NGO service providers, they begin to express their needs and hopes. The optimism that develops among women who engage in community affairs and are willing to take responsibility for their own development, despite the additional work that development activities may require, can act as a vital catalyst for change. These women serve as powerful role models for their own children and other women, who would like to imitate them once they are convinced of the benefits of such changed attitudes and behaviours.

Listening and Learning Respect and Power in the Household

“At present, my husband ignores my hard work and claims that he is feeding me and the family. With land in my name, I could tell him that I own my own land and am not dependent on him. We would be on equal terms.” – anonymous

“If our husbands want us to eat, then we eat. It totally depends on them. If the land were in my name, he would no longer beat me, and he would take care of the children as well”.

While many of the benefits that the women highlighted concerned their employers, the women also spoke about the positive changes that took place within their households. Indeed, many workshop participants had painful stories to tell both of exploitation by landlords and abuse by husbands. At the same time, many women who own or have access to land mentioned that their husbands now interfere less in their work and, more importantly, that domestic violence has declined or ceased altogether. For these women, land is both the symbol of, and the vehicle for, their equality, both within the household and in the larger community.

“If land is in our name, then we will work more vigorously and under less pressure. At present, we must beg our husbands for small mercies. But if we had land, there would be no question about our doing this any more.” – Amarawati

The women also spoke of the many men who had had land but had eventually succumbed to the pressures of landlords and revenue officials to sell it. These women are certain that if land titles had been in their names, they would have been less likely to sell it. Many women who spoke with us had become aware of their rights through workshops

organized in recent years by SDF and its local partners – and they are no longer willing to be denied these rights. On their side, men have seen women’s levels of awareness and commitment develop through self-help groups, and they realize that women are now better able to demand their rights.

“When we earn our own money, we are less frightened of arguing with our husbands about spending decisions.” – anonymous

Ram Pyari, a mother of four children, lives in Lucknouti. Her husband owns 10 *bighas* (2.3 ha) of ancestral land, but as he is also a driver for a transport company in the nearby town of Gangoh, he has given his wife responsibility for agricultural work. Although she is involved in all aspects of cultivating the land, in the end the income derived from the yields goes to her husband, who spends it, for the most part, as he sees fit. She told us that if the land were in her name, she could use the income to further her children’s education.

“Our men do not respect our labour. They can abandon us at any time. But with land in our hands, they will not be able to physically harm us, and they will give us the respect that we deserve.” – anonymous

Listening and Learning Economic Security

“Land is an opportunity for change. It is a way to have access to other resources, such as water, seeds, new technologies and bank loans.” – anonymous

“I need land for agriculture, for my living, for my life. If I have land, I can grow vegetables, paddy and wheat and will not have to beg at the landlord’s house. We are like unpaid servants.” – anonymous

The majority of women from households with no rights to land are sharecroppers, a category that is socially, politically culturally and economically marginalized. Sharecropping, as it is commonly practised, perpetuates the powerlessness of the tribal and dalit people. Their entrenched poverty, coupled with their lowly social status, leaves them with no alternatives, and serves as a breeding ground for exploitation and, at times, direct oppression. For example, sharecroppers are often required by their landlords to perform tasks unrelated to farming. To deny the landlord’s request is tantamount to losing one’s sole means of earning a living. Clearly, as far as these women are concerned, sharecropping under these circumstances cannot be a viable substitute to land ownership.

“It’s not worth it to try to use new technologies because the law always favours the landlord. Our powerlessness means that we will never be able to reap the benefits.” – anonymous

In many parts of India, tribal women are granted special rights to use forest areas. Although sharecropping is still common, the women we met at the WRAP community workshops confirmed that those who are allowed to use the forests prefer to depend on forest products, such as fuel wood and *tendu patta* (leaves for making *bedi* cigarettes), which in certain areas they can collect and sell to the Forest Department. (In other areas, women's entitlement seems to be restricted to the collection of fuel wood for their own consumption.) As noted earlier, although work in the forests makes them dependent on the day-to-day sale of firewood and other forest products, at least they receive the full benefits of their labour and are not subject to exploitation by landlords. At the same time, access to land is often tenuous. For example, the tribal women in one community we visited told us that the cultivated area used by the community was being threatened by a claim – which they insisted was false – that about 30 years ago, the village head had granted much of the area to the Forest Department. Although the villagers have worked the land and made it productive for all the years since then, the Forest Department is now trying to claim it and classify it as forest – meaning that the community would no longer be entitled to cultivate it. Other workshop participants told similar tales of insecurity and contested ownership rights. What the stories shared was the lack of clear information about the claim and the women's powerlessness to challenge it – two conditions that contribute to the vulnerability of their livelihoods and their entrenched poverty.

However, even if their rights to the forest were more secure and they were allowed to sell the products that they collect, for most of these women access to forests is not the solution either.

“By selling firewood, we have no future. One day we collect wood, then we sell it, and then the money finishes and we start collecting again. If we had land, it would give us something for the future. We could grow food, sell crops in the market, and keep cattle, goats and buffalo for milk.” – anonymous

Other women avoid sharecropping through off-farm labour activities. For example, in the village of Barabinki, many of the poorest families make bricks and break rocks to be used in road construction. The entire family participates, arriving at the brick kilns at 7.00 and remaining until 20.00 hours. The family receives 100 rupees (USD 2.13) for every 1 000 bricks they make. Most of the women are landless, and once again those women who do have small parcels of land are fighting to hold onto them, as their rights to the land are being contested in court by powerful upper-caste landlords who own the areas adjoining the village. For many of the dalits, the court process is virtually prohibitive in terms of time and money. Sadly, more than 90% of the land area used by the dalit villagers has been contested in the courts; and as the powerful local elites have far greater financial and judicial resources, the local institutions often act in their favour.

“Land gives us money and stability, which is what counts in today's society. We can get quality education for our children only when we have money. But we can only realize the importance of land when we actually own it.” – Sarastia Devi

Listening and Learning Land and Knowledge – Inseparable Partners

“Land is important, but equally important is education for women. The struggle for land and education should go hand in hand with the struggle for empowerment.” – Salmana Begum

Although the workshops focused on issues of land, the women voiced another concern with the same degree of urgency: education and knowledge. There was almost universal agreement that while land helps to empower women, knowledge and education are equally important. The lack of knowledge, the women emphasized, is at the root of their poverty; and they are adamant about their children's need for formal education, if only to avoid the exploitation and humiliation that they themselves have experienced. Some women who had had their land taken away from them felt that had they known how to read and write, this would not have happened (suggesting that they suspected they had been defrauded). Several women landowners said that their ability to make decisions regarding the land was severely compromised by their illiteracy.

“I have come here to listen to you, to educate myself and to gain knowledge.” – Pyari

In the absence of an education, the women felt a great need for knowledge. Coming together in groups, whether for collective labour activities or as part of self-help groups or development initiatives, seems to be a key to their sharing of knowledge and perceptions. In some areas, the women have formed strong community groups and organizations, where they discuss and try to resolve their problems, tapping each other's knowledge. This bond is strengthened when they work together in the fields as sharecroppers and agricultural workers – and even more so, they said, when they collect fuel wood in the forest together. Sharing their perceptions, their concerns and their *gyan* (knowledge) strengthens them and increases their self-confidence.

“From the self-help groups, we have learned how to obtain credit, how to save and borrow money. We used to be dependent on landlords for loans. Now we can look after ourselves.” – anonymous

Many of the tribal women were interested in Bharat Shrestha's⁵ comments regarding community farming, as is practised in Nepal. Bharat suggested that if tribal women united, they could work on much larger parcels of land and produce greater crop yields, which would help to reduce their vulnerability to the feudal-like system.

“We did not know anything earlier, but after participating in these meetings I can now go to the bank, speak to the postman, talk about my rights to the forest authority. So I have definitely got strength from these meetings and now I understand my rights.” – Sushila Devi

⁵ Director of Mode-Nepal, Bharat Shrestha organized the WRAP workshops held in Nepal in 2001 and also participated in the first of these community workshops in India in September 2001.

Mobilization is the catalyst for achievement and transformation, and many women described how they used to be apprehensive about narrating anything to outsiders. Their group activities and discussions often led them to broader participation efforts to improve their condition. Some of the women have travelled to different parts of their state, participating in workshops and conferences and discussing their problems with NGOs working in the area. In time, their villages have learned to admire these women's outside work. Their involvement in meetings and their learning to read, write and count have earned them respect. Even the men feel proud of the women, and encourage them to participate more vigorously.

“Initially when I wanted to unite women, there was a struggle, but soon men realized that education and knowledge are two important things that can change the lives of their families.” – Sushila Yadav

For the past few years, SDF has been working with other human rights groups to raise the issue of land rights for women, and the women themselves are growing aware of the wrongs that have been done to them. Through their participation and their growing awareness and knowledge, a radical change has taken place: the women are craving more information and they are ready to fight for their rights.

Land is ...

Land is might, land is right,
Land is water, land is shelter,
Land is dignity, land is honour,
Land is our mother.

Let us promise each other,
That it will not be for barter,
Let us unite to save it from
exploiters.

Women need forests,
Women need water,
Access to education and to
power,
Freedom from bondage,
Freedom from hunger.
Let us bring them
'the honour'.

Land to women is
Actually
Revolution
As it saves

Children from malnutrition and
Makes
Families function.

Drawn from the words of women at the
workshops by V. B. Rawat, Director
SDF

A Final Word

The women whose words are reported in the preceding pages were asked to provide reasons why land is important. *What do you want to tell people in other countries about the reasons poor rural women should be given secure access to land and other natural resources?* It is clear that, in a short time, a group of WRAP ‘outsiders’ cannot fully understand and capture all the opinions and perceptions of village women, particularly when the women come from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds as was the case in India. At the same time, the group believes that the statements of the women themselves reflect to a significant degree the perceptions of a larger whole, especially in highlighting how important access to land is for women, their households and the communities in which the women live.

As talking to these women has shown us, giving women secure access to land can transform their lives. They were unequivocal: access to land means less marginalization, less exploitation, greater control and greater power. Those with land had a clear sense of security about their future and that of their families, as secure access gave them a more stable source of income, together with new opportunities for making money for their households. What is more, their dignity and sense of self-confidence and self-esteem had increased; and, in tandem, the respect shown to them by their husbands had grown, as had their responsibilities and their role in decision-making. We learned that these transformations help to bring about a shift in the unequal power relations that generate and perpetuate poverty within households and communities.

“Thank you for your encouragement. We hope you will spread our words and our issues to other parts of the world. We want to progress and we want to be a partner in our development.” – Sushila Yadav

We have also been reminded of a simple, but crucial lesson: talking to poor households, and in particular women, listening to their views and perceptions, and learning from their knowledge provide valuable insights that cannot be gained elsewhere. In documenting the voices of poor Indian women, we hope that what they have to say is given attention and respect, and that their observations and insights are used to fuel our efforts to help create the conditions under which the poor can lift themselves out of poverty.

“I will never compromise my dignity despite threats by the local authorities. Land is a matter of honour and social security, and I will fight for it with all my might.” – Rehana Begum

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WRAP is an expanding programme. If you would like further information on the programme, or should you wish to become involved, or even organize community workshops using WRAP approaches, please feel free to contact the Popular Coalition.

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