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**Emancipation from the land – emancipation from unequal structures?  
Opportunities and pitfalls for women in the rural labour market**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The potential of women's inclusion in the labour market for transforming unequal gender relations has been highlighted by a number of scientists, prominently also by Amartya Sen. He argued that the mere act of going out of the house is empowering for women (Sen 1975, Kabeer 2012). Nancy Fraser challenged this position (2011). In her view, work is only emancipatory if it delivers recognition, respect and the capacity for active citizenship. The tension between these two positions provides a horizon for the following paper. For the case of rural labour relations it examines whether the shift from land-based to wage-based livelihoods entails emancipatory elements for women. The point of departure of this contribution is the assumption that the picture of rural spaces and its respective economic activities is, if not largely false, grossly underspecified. "The rural" and "rural women and men" as conventionally portrayed in reports, funding schemes, development agency strategies but also in academia, suffers from ill-framings in four dimensions: a theoretical, an ideological, a methodological and a political dimension.

I will not go into details of the reasons of these misrepresentations here, I have done so elsewhere (Bieri 2017), and so have Oya and Pontara in a series of essays on rural labour markets (2015). Instead, I will focus on the consequences of our skewed perception which are rather obvious: Our understanding of rural realities remains deficient. This holds in particular for those rural existences that are increasingly land-scarce or land-less and thus do not correspond with influential "small-holder"-centred discourses on rural development. Land-independent wage-related activities such as on or off-farm casual labour, informal petty economy, or labour-relations disguised as labour exchange, even though they often outweigh agricultural production in their importance to sustain rural livelihoods, have received far less attention from both researchers and policy makers.

The gendered structures of these under-researched rural labour relations are far from being adequately analysed, let alone understood. On the contrary, the mainstream assumptions seem to prove convenient for addressing concerns of rural poverty and female deprivation, as John Sender noted more than 10 years ago (2003). They justify an oddly similar and over many years rather persistent range of policies, focusing on women as self-employed farmers and female headed households. The perspective dominating rural development thinking is a pattern that could be termed – and I quote Sender here – the "agricultural growth based on small-farm efficiency"-paradigm (2003, 414). It is convenient because both, growth and equity goals are simultaneously targeted via the popular emphasis on small-farm agriculture.

It has become apparent that the recipes emerging from the above described framings of rural development did not work well. Price incentives and integration into markets tend to benefit men. While land has been at the heart of policy prescriptions against female poverty and to enhance women's empowerment (Razavi 2009), the attempt to improve women's access to assets and resources has, at best, had mixed outcomes. Even though women's legal status has seen an extraordinary improvement across the globe during the last two decades, women's interests often get trapped between official regulations, their implementations on the ground and a context-bound legal practice that tends to deviate from official rules and be in the hands of customary authorities. If they do get their share of land, be it by way of inheritance, titling, bargaining, incentives installed through development initiatives or other types of interventions, it is often land of lesser quality (FAO, 2010).

Income diversification is promoted as a means to strengthen the resilience of rural households against shocks and uncertainties. Echoed by scholars of the livelihood approach, rural people's "choices" – sometimes even alluded to as their "portfolios" (Collins et al. 2010) are being assessed in the context of uncertainty, poverty and resource depletion. Oya criticizes the

livelihood approach in that it “has made little contribution to the understanding of rural labour markets and wage employment (2015, 9). According to him, false suppositions about the rural labour market, choice theoretic production and consumption models as well as romanticized smallholder farming approaches overemphasized the risk-coping capacities of rural households and created an imaginary of sets of activities by which rural people lift themselves out of poverty. The promotion of women as self-employed workers in land-extensive activities (hairdressers, handicrafts, food stalls, etc.) that emerged as alternatives, produced increased work burdens. Since care obligations remain largely on women’s shoulders, new bottlenecks emerged. Or, in the words of IMF’s director, Christine Lagarde (2014, 3): “Women are ‘underutilised, underpaid, under-appreciated and over-exploited”.

As a summary, we conclude that, based on inadequate assumptions of what the realities of the rural poor really consist of, the mainstream development prescription to fight female poverty in rural spaces has been the vision of “a rural petty bourgeoisie” (Sender 2003, 414) that will eventually articulate their demands more compellingly by building associations. These, in turn, will be capable of holding official institutions accountable for the market distorting and rent-seeking trespassing they are prone to.

My ambition with this paper is to spark attention for the manifold realities of rural women. Exposed to a level and intensity of unprecedented change they are a very heterogeneous group whose interests may not always be aligned. Indeed, as members of various social groups, their social position as women intersects with other structural categories. Thus, their gender-interest may not be their primary concern. It is from this complex and intersectional perspective that the functioning of rural labour markets have to be examined, and the question as to how the jobs that emerge work – or do not work – for women. Although they are particularly hard to isolate, a special emphasis shall be given to young women. In the debate on agricultural transition it is often expected that if women end up having bigger workloads while not necessarily improved bargaining positions or higher incomes, for that matter, we might expect better outcomes for young women – for example due to the fact that they might benefit from a better education as compared to their mothers. I will argue in this paper that, while indeed, the data of our current study points to investments in children’s education in contexts of agricultural transition and high-value crops, the informality of rural labour is to a degree that will barely allow for an advantage of more educated women. However, we do have some indications in our studies that education may enhance women’s position via other means – for example by offering them positions in a cooperative or within the political representation of their local communities.

So let me turn to those rural classes that might not even have moved into the focus of the above mentioned developmental initiatives. It is no secret that the very poor – mostly the landless – are often excluded from “representative” national household surveys. These households that disappear from the radar of standardized data collection are often characterized by factors such as low education level of all household members, women who had kids at a very young age, and, regardless of whether there is a male partner or not, heavily rely on wage income of the female household head. Many of them work as unskilled labourers, often on-farm, on a seasonal account.

Bringing the rural population, and women in particular, into paid work is seen as promising for poverty alleviation and development more broadly. Jobs not only offer a pathway out of poverty but are deemed a silver-bullet to women’s empowerment. Many countries of the global South have subscribed to labour intensive growth in rural areas, where a large share of

the poor – 450 million wage workers in agriculture (IAASTD 2009), or 80 per cent of the world’s working poor (ILO 2015) – earn their livelihoods. Governments increasingly embarked on production of high-value crops offering jobs in production and packaging, while technological inputs have remained marginal. Horticulture, floriculture, processed food products, so called “superfoods” and spices have absorbed large numbers of the rural workforce, and women in particular.

Rural wage work however has suffered from under- and misrepresentation. Studies on rural wage employment are rare and research on labour relations suffers from an urban bias. Even the World Bank acknowledged that rural labour markets are poorly documented and that there is little insight into how they work for effective and sustainable anti-poverty strategies (2007). Existing secondary data sources are inadequate to capture the incidence, particularities, and dynamics of rural labour markets. Besides, the definition of what accounts as “rural” is often missing, and the archetypical poor person in rural areas, as described above, is considered a (male) farmer. Feminist rethinking of the household as a working entity and scale of analysis seems to barely have left marks on neoclassical as well as political economy accounts of agrarian change (Razavi 2009). As a result, for female workers in the rural labour market, the ideological and methodological blind spots and thus the lack of attention are even more pronounced: “By lumping together very different forms of wage labour, income-based studies fail to appreciate the importance of wage employment for the most vulnerable rural people, especially very poor women (Sender 2003, 6).”

In our empirical study on feminization and agricultural transition (FATE<sup>1</sup>), the households that composed the sample of a four-country study on agricultural transition and feminization of rural labour we are currently conducting – in Bolivia, Laos, Nepal and Rwanda – range from an above average level in income and education for the case of Bolivia and Nepal, to low levels of education and income in Laos and Rwanda. The Rwanda case best reflects the household characteristics described in Oya’s work that was also based in sub-Saharan Africa. Results from our surveys show that the education level of a woman farmer in Rwanda (head or spouse) would significantly increase the probability of a households’ participation in agricultural output markets. Moreover, the effect of education levels can be seen indirectly in farmers’ capacity to effectively attend training and subsequently implement what they have learnt. In Bolivia, we estimate that the relatively high literacy and education rate of the local farmers is one of the main reasons why women have climbed up the ladder in leading positions in traditional authority bodies as well as in associations. This is particularly interesting, as in Bolivia, the associations seem to be bridging the gap left by traditional authorities when it comes to the regulation of natural resource use and management. In all four case study sites, women seem to participate to a high degree in commercial agriculture. In what follows, we try to describe this work in terms of recognition and formality, work load, intra-household division of labour, and caring responsibilities.

In all the cases, the labour relations emerging from high-value crop agriculture are highly informal. Workloads for women tend to increase, and technical innovation is practically the only way how formerly “female” tasks turn into “male” tasks as they suddenly seem to qualify for “heavy work” – as is the case in Laos. The Lao case clearly illustrates of how the ideology of the gendered division of labour outplays the practical nature of how work is organized between a couple. Entrenched forms of gender ideologies determine the type of work done by either

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<sup>1</sup> [www.fate.unibe.ch](http://www.fate.unibe.ch)

men or women. Regardless of the nature or the work, “light” stands for female tasks, even if the activity in question is far from being “light”. Regarding the gendered division of labour in Rwanda, there seems to be only one way: women assume tasks that used to be the men’s responsibilities. There is neither a way back nor a corresponding mechanism of shifting responsibilities from women to men. We further observe a devaluation of women’s tasks in the commercial on-farm production for casual labour, and discriminatory practices in terms of wage and labour conditions (Bigler 2017). The Bolivian case provides partly an exception in that for the commercial quinoa farming, labour is called via family and extended networks. People heavily rely on distant family members, and as long as the price was high, the incentive for distant relatives to return to the villages seemed to work. Thus, the labour concentration for women does not take place at the same rate as in other contexts of export-led agriculture. In Bolivia, the commercialization of quinoa and the engagement of farmers in the quinoa business did not produce a significant change in intra-household relationships.

To sum up, the rural labour market offers little emancipatory opportunities for women. Women’s relation to land often being mediated via a male family member, their emancipation from the land risks to move them into an even more vulnerable position. Often, it is the commercialization process itself that absorbs land women used to devote to food production. If there was no land to begin with, women engaging in land-extensive activities are all the more prone to abusive working relations. The structures of the rural labour market we found tend to be hugely informalised. Women are penalized when they get pregnant or if they bring their child for work. Work burdens seem to be further concentrated on female shoulders – usually the mother, however, the more she is engaged in commercial farming, the greater the risk that daughters will assume care work. This contrasts with the optimistic scenario that the next generation will benefit from their mothers’ participation in the labour market through education. The last paragraph of this paper will discuss some questions regarding young women.

We are not quite ready yet to produce findings based on our own data, which is why the following paragraph relies on a selection of the (scarce) literature on the topic. The literature is rather clear on the fact that “emancipation” takes place if (young) women actually leave their villages and thus escape from the social control and restrictions of their families and the community structures. The jobs they access in smaller or larger regional centres might be of very low standards. In fact, employers of agro-industries, for example, often prefer young women as they tend to work for lower wages, don’t oppose precarious conditions and are hardly capable of self-organising (Oya 2015). This contrasts with Mertens and Swinnen who find that large employers tend to offer fairer conditions. They conclude that, even though value chains remain gendered, gender inequality decreases as large companies are under observation regarding the standards of their working relations in their distant production sites (2012). Other studies confer that young women can turn their working experience into an advantage. At a distance from patriarchal family structures and outside of the social control of a community, they are exposed to different sets of values. Having gone away and earning their own money serves to improve their negotiating position in their family – for example, they may claim a personal stake when it comes to choosing a partner for marriage (Lavers 2013).

The main point I want to make for this debate is that the outcomes of their labour market engagement has to be scrutinized for young women. Available information needs to be analysed specifically for this group and for a variety of working relations that the rural labour markets offer to them. Analyses of young rural women’s working trajectories can shed light on

supposed emancipatory potentials of jobs. In particular, as women's relations to land and labour are often mediated via or negotiated with a male family member, these family members need to be targeted in interventions for rural women's empowerment. Aspirations of fathers with regards to their daughters' labour market activities need to be illuminated, relationships to in-laws scrutinized according to each context, and competitive and synergetic initiatives regarding brothers and sisters taken into account. The social institutions regulating these and other relationships between men and women – namely family law, marriage, divorce, inheritance laws – should be at the heart of policies for rural women and girls. However, they should not be the end of our efforts. The rural labour market should be regulated in view of the respect, recognition and capacity for active citizenship as postulated by Fraser. Any initiative on rural women and girls with respect to the rural labour market should be designed towards these requirements. Thus, the recommendations to the 62<sup>nd</sup> CSW concerning women and girls in the rural labour market read as follows:

1. Enhancing women's self-organisation via incentives, training and awareness-building so as to invest in the ability of rural women to drive demand for and implementation of policies.
2. Addressing the male relatives not simply as men, but as fathers, husbands, brothers, sons. Likewise, address women not just as women, but as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters.
3. Address discriminatory family law, marital regimes, inheritance, and customary laws.
4. Launch initiatives to improve women's legal literacy, namely via extension services, media programmes and theater campaigns where adequate.
5. Carrot and stick-policies to formalize labour relations, to avoid women's discrimination in the labour market and to improve their working conditions in terms of skills development, safety, social-security and long-term perspectives.
6. Trend towards privatization of agricultural infrastructure and related services should be reconsidered in light of women's and households' needs, their work burden and financial capabilities.
7. Promote green value chains and markets with recognition for protection of biodiversity, indigenous crops, soil and water management; ensure that women's groups have access to these value chains by providing training, assistance with certification, direct producer/consumer links
8. Use innovative methodologies to conduct power analyses to build awareness of within-community power structures that are often glossed over within the community members' self-identification.
9. Recognize and facilitate migration as an effective development strategy and pathway to empowerment for (young) women by way of providing sound information, offering assistance, reducing barriers on remittances and providing incentives for returnees to rural areas.

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