

# *Institutional Innovations, Gender, and the Economy*

**Bina Agarwal**

**2017 Balzan Prize for Gender Studies**

**Balzan GPC Adviser:** Marjan Schwegman

**Project Partnerships:** Senior, mid-career and early-career colleagues, as well as doctoral students and post-docs in India and Europe

**Affiliated Institutions:** Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi; Global Development Institute, Manchester, UK

**Period:** July 2020 – December 2024

Bina Agarwal is Professor of Development Economics and Environment at the Global Development Institute, School for Environment, Education and Development at the University of Manchester, UK. She is also affiliated with the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, at which she was former Professor and Director.

## **Overview**

Since June 2020, Agarwal's Balzan research project has pursued four research trajectories under the broad theme "Institutional Innovations, Gender and the Economy". A fourth trajectory, 'Institutional Innovation to facilitate land agreements' has been added to the original three. Each trajectory, presented as an independent but interrelated project, has involved collaboration with young early-career scholars as well as mid-career and senior colleagues. The funds have been used to support younger scholars with Masters, and doctoral students, several of whom were also coauthors in a number of papers. The projects have also built research capacity among post-Masters and doctoral students by employing them as research analysts or co-partners. In addition, workshops have been organized to share project results with policymakers and civil society in various forms, so that the research can have an impact on and make a difference to people's lives. This is also in keeping with the larger aims of the Balzan Prize of fostering human well-being.

It needs mention, however, that progress on the field-based parts of these projects was brought to a halt over 2000-2022 due to the COVID crises. That time was used productively for analysing existing data and publishing a large number of papers as well as sharing the results in keynotes and plenary presentations via Zoom.

## **Project 1. Group farming and collective action theory in Asia and Europe**

This project focuses on an alternative model of farming based on small farmer cooperation and aims to break new ground in institutional analysis and collective action theory. The context is an endemic and intensifying crisis of food security, played out against the backdrop of climate change and high inequalities in land distribution.

Most farming systems in developing countries today are characterized by millions of small family farms, typically facing severe constraints in access to inputs, credit, irrigation, resource conserving technology, and markets. As a result, their productivity remains far below potential, and they are unable to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Can a model based on a group approach, involving the pooling of land, labour, and capital by smallholders provide an alternative? Can it help small farmers (an increasing percentage of whom are women) overcome their input constraints, enjoy scale economies, and enhance their bargaining power vis-a-vis markets and states? In particular, can such a model outperform individual family farms in terms of productivity and profits to ensure more secure livelihoods for those involved?

This is a relatively unexplored field since most work on collective action has focused on the governance of common pool resources and not on cooperation around private property resources and farming. Theoretically, the project has sought to extend collective action theory and provide insights on group functioning, by examining the contexts in which farmer cooperation in production emerges and is sustained. Empirically, the detailed primary data Agarwal had already collected in India, France, and Romania has now been analysed and journal articles published on that

basis. In the latter two countries, the surveys were undertaken in collaboration with researchers in Europe and the UK.

In addition, Agarwal has interviewed farmers in person in Canada and England in 2022, in collaboration with local academic colleagues and scholars, to assess the forms of cooperative and joint venture agreements that are currently to be found in those countries. She has also visited the field in Ireland. These interviews were not large systematic surveys but can provide the basis of working papers currently in progress.

Apart from adding to the body of knowledge through academic publications, this subject has substantial potential for providing policy pointers to governments, international agencies, and civil society on ways of improving the viability of smallholder agriculture.

Agarwal has also continued to work with researchers and practitioners on a range of group farms that were catalysed four years ago through an action-research project in eastern India and Nepal. Her writings influenced aspects of this project in its early stages, and she subsequently provided direct inputs to help shape the farm structures. In 2023 she also visited the field and met with some of these farmers' groups in Bengal. This project constitutes an unusual opportunity to study the process of institution change.

In addition, a group farming initiative that was launched by a local NGO, Cohesion, in Gujarat (in eastern India) is being documented by a young consultant who had worked with Agarwal on an earlier project, and her time was covered by the Balzan Prize funds. She has completed fieldwork and documentation of the 17 woman's group farms with support from Cohesion. The data collected is awaiting analysis.

At present, Agarwal is also working on a book on group farming in Asia and Europe, drawing on the many empirical studies I have already undertaken.

## **Project 2. Gender gaps in property ownership**

The issue of women's rights in land and property is increasingly being recognised across nations as one of key importance for gender equality and economic inclusion. In fact, it is the UN's Fifth Sustainable Development Goal. Agarwal's pioneering research on this subject in the late 1980s was published in a multiple award-winning book, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), which covered five countries, and included numerous papers. She also led a civil society campaign to amend the Hindu inheritance law in India in 2005 and make it gender equal.

Yet much more remains to be done, both in research and its application. Under the Balzan project, Agarwal has worked with two early-career colleagues in India on new data sets which have made it possible to undertake an all-India analysis of the extent of gender inequality in property, its regional variations, its changes over time, and its implications for food security, poverty alleviation, children's welfare, and women's empowerment.

Pervesh Anthwal (doctoral student) and Malvika Mahesh (post-doc), whose time was covered through the Balzan Prize funds, co-authored a GDI Working paper and later a journal article on how many and which women own land in India (published 2021). Subsequently, Malvika Mahesh and Agarwal published a second paper on gendered land ownership and farm productivity (published 2023).

In addition, Agarwal and a French colleague co-authored traced the biases in the National Family Health Surveys of India in gender differences in land ownership. These Surveys, undertaken every five years, are the most important detailed data sources for demographic indicators in India. Their paper, published in 2023, has major implications for data collection and correction.

Another forthcoming publication is a paper co-authored with Shruti Naik (a young LLB graduate), with research support from four law interns covered through the Balzan Prize funds. The paper "Do courts grant women their inheritance shares? An analysis of case law in India" is currently in the process of publication in a high impact journal.

## **Project 3: Environmental governance and conservation**

Under this project, Agarwal had initially planned to examine how sacred groves were being used by Himalayan

communities to create social barriers to deforestation, but the planned fieldwork was not possible. Instead, she worked with a doctoral student and an early career researcher on a new paper entitled “Indigenous political representation and forest conservation”.

The study examines political representation by indigenous communities – whom many see as stewards of forests – and asks the following questions: Can indigenous political control over forests enhance forest cover and biodiversity conservation? Or would it catalyse greater extraction for revenue gains? The paper drew on India’s uniquely multi-layered enactments which granted Scheduled Tribes (STs) political representation – and hence control over local forests – in constituencies reserved for them in state assemblies and village councils.

Taking Chhattisgarh state as an example, the paper uses geospatial technologies for assessing forest cover and decennial census data to compare the state’s 20,000-odd villages across reserved and unreserved categories over the time period 2001-2019. It differentiates between delimitation time periods and between Assembly Constituency (AC) reservations and PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) reservations, the former being at the assembly level and the latter at the village council level.

Between 2001 and 2019, Chhattisgarh’s village area under tree cover increased by almost 240,000 ha in aggregate for the 10,554 villages with any reservation (AC or PESA). This was four times the increase in never-reserved villages. Again, from 2009-2019, relative to never-reserved villages, the likelihood of a 5-percentage point increase in tree cover was significantly greater in solely AC reserved villages, but significantly *lower* in villages reserved under PESA alone. Non-village forests also improved more under AC reservation. The results suggest a policy win-win for assembly-level political representation, promoting both social inclusion and conservation, but they also indicate that divergent interests could stymie village-level conservation. Here additional incentives to conserve may be needed. The study has policy implications for other countries with high levels of tribal populations and forests.

They have published a GDI, University of Manchester, working paper on this in 2023, and a revised version was submitted to a major high impact journal, where it is under review.

#### **Project 4: Institutional innovation to facilitate smallholder land agreements**

Agarwal launched this project as an experiment to see if providing an agent to help farmers lease in and lease out their land in Indian villages increases the likelihood of agreements, reduces the time taken to arrive at an agreement, and reduces the amount of cultivable land lying due to the absence of an agreement.

Unlike cities in India, where agents mediate land leasing arrangements, villages lack such agents. Farmers wanting to lease in or lease out land thus have to do so on the basis of their personal networks, which may be incomplete or lack information on potential lessors and lessees. Thus, since both parties spend substantial time in striking suitable deals, leasing land involves substantial transactions costs in terms of time, and also leaves productive land fallow when the landowner is unable to find someone to lease it to.

The project was initiated in two demographically diverse villages in West Bengal in east India in early 2022. In both villages, baseline censuses were conducted to chart land use and identify potential lessors and lessees. Two male members of the research team who lived in or near the study villages were located to serve as “agent intermediaries” (one in each village). Prior to that, they and 2 doctoral students conducted a baseline census in each village. The work was overseen by a senior NGO member who had also been working on the group farming project in the area earlier. A follow-up survey one year later provided information on new agreements. The field project is still in progress.

The research team in the field consists of five individuals: a senior NGO supervisor, two doctoral students for conducting and documenting the surveys, and two local males with grassroots experience in the villages under study. Another local researcher translates the notes documenting the process kept by these two village-based researchers from Bengali to English. In addition, for this and other projects, one young post-MA researcher has been working with Agarwal in Delhi to log in data on excel and cross-check for gaps.

This project has served to build substantial research and field intervention capacity among young Indian researchers and grass-roots workers.

## Awards and Honours (2021-2024)

2024. Distinguished Alumna Award, Miranda House, University of Delhi, 22 February.
2023. Kenneth Boulding award 2023, given biennially by the International Society for Ecological Economics. Event at Santa Marta, Colombia, October 28.  
<https://www.isecoeco.org/the-kenneth-e-boulding-memorial-award-for-ecological-economics-2023/>  
<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bina-agarwal-wins-kenneth-boulding-award-9025564/>
2023. Named in Stanford University's 2023 list of top 2% Scientists worldwide, in both "Career-Long Achievement" and "Single Year Achievement" categories.  
<https://elsevier.digitalcommonsdata.com/datasets/btchxktzyw/6>
2022. Honorary Doctorate, University of Guelph, Canada, July.  
<https://canadaindiaresearch.ca/news/2022/06/honorary-degree-bina-agarwal>
2022. Invited to be Fellow, International Science Council, 2022-
2021. Elected Honorary Fellow of Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, UK.  
<https://www.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/fellows/professor-bina-agarwal>
2021. Spotlighted in the University of Manchester's SEED PGT brochure for pioneering work in gender inequality in property: <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/humanities-blog/2021/07/16/academic-spotlight-pioneering-work-on-gender-inequality-in-property/>

## Publications (July 2020 – February 2024)

### Books and Journal special issues

2021. *Gender Inequalities in Developing Countries*. Italian compendium of author's selected papers, il Mulino, Milan. Book launch 21 April. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izC4iXn6aCI>
2022. *Women, Pandemics and the Global South*, Special issue of *Economia Politica* (coedited with Amartya Sen, Alberto Quardio Curzio and others). An Introduction: [Women, pandemics and the Global South: an introductory overview | Economia Politica \(springer.com\)](#)

### Project 1 publications: Group Farming

2023. Achieving gender equality in access to land and assets: The transformative potential of group farming, T20 Policy Brief. <https://t20ind.org/research/achieving-gender-equality-in-access-to-land-and-assets/>
2021. 'Experiments in farmers' collectives in eastern India and Nepal: Process, benefits, and challenges', (co-authors F. Sugden & others), *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21(1): 90-121.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/joac.12369>
2021. 'Revisiting group farming in a post-socialist economy: The case of Romania', (co-authors K. M. Dobay & R. Sabates-Wheeler). *Journal of Rural Studies* 81: 148-158. Paper received excellence award from the Romanian-Academy, Iasi branch. [https://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0743-0167\(20\)30347-8](https://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0743-0167(20)30347-8)
2021. 'Women and the collective'. In J. Browne (ed.), *Why Gender?* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).
2020. "A Tale of Two Experiments: Institutional Innovations in Women's Group Farming." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 41 (2): 169-192.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02255189.2020.1779673>
2020. "Does Group Farming Empower Rural Women? Lessons from India's Experiments." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(4). July. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03066150.2019.1628020>
2020. "Labouring for Livelihoods: Gender, Productivity and Collectivity." *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63(1): 21-37. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41027-020-00211-y>

## Project 2: Gender and property ownership publications

2024. 'Do courts grant women their inheritance shares? An analysis of case law in India', (co-author, Shruthi Naik). *World Development*, in process.
2023. 'Does the landowner's gender affect self-cultivation and farm productivity? An analysis for India' (co-author M. Mahesh). *Journal of Development Studies*, 59(5): 758-777.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220388.2022.2162883>
2023. 'The NFHS Data on Women's Landownership: Pitfalls and Prospects', (co-author, C. Z. Guilmoto), Commentary, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 58(33), 19 August.
2022. 'Women's struggle for land in South Asia: Can legal reforms trump social norms?' UNU-Wider annual Lecture 25.  
[https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Annual-lecture/AL\\_25\\_220824\\_low.pdf](https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Annual-lecture/AL_25_220824_low.pdf)
2021. 'How many and which women own land in India: Intra-gender and inter-gender gaps', (co-authors P. Anthwal & M. Mahesh). *Journal of Development Studies*, 57(11): 1807-1829.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2021.1887478>

## Project 3: Environmental governance publications

2023. 'Does political representation improve forest conservation? The Indian experience', (co-authors Shiva Sharma and Shamindra Roy). GDI Working paper 2023-65.
2021. 'Environmental resources and gender inequality: Use, degradation and conservation'. In G. Berik and E. Kongar (eds.). *Handbook of Feminist Economics* (Routledge, USA).

## Other academic publications

2023. Gender, Presence and Representation: Can Presence Alone Make for Effective Representation? *Social Change*, 53(1): 34-50. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00490857231158178>
2021. 'My vision of India 2047 AD: Transforming gendered institutions'. In N. Agarwal (ed.): *Her Right to Equality*. (Delhi: Penguin Books).
2022. Agarwal, B. "Imperatives of recognizing the complexities: gendered impacts and responses to COVID-19 in India", *Economia Politica*, 39: 31-52. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40888-021-00242-8>
2021. 'Livelihoods in COVID times: Gendered perils and new pathways in India', *World Development*, 139, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X20304393>
2021. 'Reflections on the less visible and less measured: Gender and COVID-19', *Gender and Society*, March 19, 35(2), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08912432211001299>
2020. 'COVID-19 and the case for global development' (co-authored with others), *World Development*, Vol. 134.

## Popular pieces published

2024. 'A very flawed code', Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code. *Indian Express*, Edit page, 10.2.24.
2023. 'Revisiting Capetown after 25 years: Apartheid, Cheetahs and Land Rights', *The Wire*, 7.9.23  
<https://thewire.in/world/revisiting-cape-town-after-25-years-apartheid-cheetahs-and-land-rights>
2023. 'Chasing the tiger in Ranthambore', *Indian Express*, 19.3.23
2023. 'Common code conversations', *Indian Express*, 25.1. 2023
2022. 'Long road ahead from I-Day speech to women's work', *Indian Express*, 19.8.22
2021. 'The invisible farmers', *Outlook*, 1 February. <https://magazine.outlookindia.com/story/india-news-the-invisible-farmers/3041842020>.

2020. 'Spot the seeds of growth: Can agriculture and rural sector jump-start India's economy?' *Indian Express*, Nov. 18. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/agriculture-gdp-growth-economy-7055240/>
2020. 'Resource poor women farmers benefit by forming collectives', blog, Thrive, CGIAR. (co-authored with Fraser Sugden). <https://wle.cgiar.org/thrive/2020/10/15/resource-poor-women-farmers-benefit-forming-collectives>

### **Distinguished Lectures and keynotes**

2024. Delhi University, 'Gender Inequality in Property', Economics Department, Miranda House, 22 February.
2023. University of Saskatchewan, Canada, Keynote address on 'Rethinking the way we farm', hosted by the Centre for Study of Rural Cooperatives, January Youtube link: <https://youtu.be/3sLN2YNpb9o>
2023. World Bank, Delhi: Stree Dialogues Inaugural Public Lecture, 'Progressive laws, regressive practice', 15 February.
2023. South Africa, PLAAS Public Lecture, 'Obstacles to Women's Land Rights and Ways Forward,' June 13. <https://youtu.be/gImw0JLuPc>
2023. University of Galway & Teagasc, Ireland: Public lecture on 'The case for farmer cooperation: lessons from India and Europe', 24 May. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XropX5qN\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XropX5qN_4)
2023. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome. Lecture on 'current affairs in humanistic studies: Six stories of Women, online Nov 22.
2022. Golden Jubilee Lecture of the Journal *Social Change*, on 'Gender, Presence and Representation', sponsored by Sage publishing, IIC and CSD, Delhi. 22 Feb. <https://youtu.be/vZVLfng3yZo>
2022. Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Delhi. Distinguished lecture on 'Rethinking the Way We Farm in India', 24 Jan. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZY9fg5gwr0>
2022. University of Cambridge. Public lecture on: 'Progressive laws, Regressive practice? Gender, land and productivity in India', Centre for History and Economics & Centre for Gender Studies and South Asian Studies, 30 November.
2021. UNU-WIDER, Helsinki: WIDER annual lecture on 'Women's Struggles for Land in South Asia: Can Legal Reforms Trump Social Norms?' delivered online, 9 December <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRav6zKZYaA>
2021. Keynote, opening plenary, CGIAR conference: Cultivating Equality. 12 October. <https://gender.cgiar.org/news-events/harvesting-equality-means-sowing-partnerships-and-cultivating-groups>

### **Plenary panelist and paper presentations**

2024. IHD, Delhi, plenary panelist, Climate change and human well-being, IHD Silver Jubilee international conference, 11-13 January, IIC, Delhi.
2024. FAO and Niti Ayog, Delhi: Plenary on Gender and Climate Change, at conference on 'Advancing Climate Resilient Agrifood Systems', IIC, Delhi, 18-19 January.
2024. University of Oxford, plenary panelist on 'The politics of land inequality and pathways to land and food sovereignty'. IPES-Food event, Oxford Real Farming Conference, 4 January.
2023. Cornell University, Distinguished lecture on: 'Is there a case for farmer cooperation today: lessons from India and Europe, 31 October.
2023. Colombia, Boulding award presentation at the biennial conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics, Santa Marta, Colombia, 28 October.

2023. University of Oxford, plenary panelist on ‘resilience’, OpenAg Symposium, Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development, Somerville College, October
2023. CGIAR and ICAR, New Delhi. Plenary panelist and Session chair, CGIAR’s ‘High-level International Dialogue Meeting on Gender and Climate Change’, October 13.
2023. IAFFE Annual Conference, Cape Town: two paper presentations, July.
- 2023 Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi. Public Seminar on ‘Indigenous political reservation and forest conservation’, 22 September.
2022. Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH), New Delhi: Presented paper in Conference on Socio-economic inequality, 31 March.
2022. International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE), Geneva, Co-organised a panel on ‘Rethinking Care Work in Feminist Economic Analysis’ and made a presentation, June 2022
2022. IAFFE annual Conference, Geneva: Panel on ‘Caring Labor: Reflections on the creation of IAFFE on its 30th anniversary’ June.
2021. International Economic Association, invited panel, biennial conference, July.
2021. International Association for Agricultural Economics, invited panel, conference, August.
2021. Delhi School of Economics and Institute of Economic Growth. Public seminar on ‘How many and which women own land in India,’ December.

## Media interviews

2023. Yale University, Interviewed for film: “Panchayati Raj: Patriarchy, agency and change”,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y53GZPHq0Bs>
2022. CGIAR & IWMI, Interviewed for documentary film “Agricultural collectivities in North Bengal”,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmCB8hst77U>
2021. Center for Science and Environment, India. ‘Group Farming can transform agriculture post-COVID’, May.
2021. *Manifesto* (Italian newspaper) May 2021, <https://ilmanifesto.it/bina-agarwal-diseguaglianze-di-genere-le-cooperative-di-donne-indicano-la-via/>
2021. *La Repubblica* (Italian Newspaper), 5 May.  
[https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/robinson/2021/05/09/news/bina\\_agarwal\\_il\\_matriarcato\\_fa\\_bene\\_all\\_economia\\_-300189283/](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/robinson/2021/05/09/news/bina_agarwal_il_matriarcato_fa_bene_all_economia_-300189283/)
2021. *Corriere della sera* (Italian newspaper), Interview, 4 May.
2021. *Mediapart* (France) Indian farmer protests, 4 April  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/040421/en-inde-des-paysans-toujours-mobilises-contre-la-deregulation-des-marches-agricoles>
2020. *Newslick, India*, Interview. ‘Women’s rights in property and land’: <https://www.newslick.in/Women-Who-Own-Property-Face-Lower-Risk-Domestic-Violence>, 29 September.
2020. *Le Repubblica*, ‘100 women who are changing the world’, Magazine "D", 22 August.  
[https://d.repubblica.it/magazine/2020/08/24/news/numero\\_speciale\\_d\\_100\\_donne\\_scaricalo\\_gratis-4779795/](https://d.repubblica.it/magazine/2020/08/24/news/numero_speciale_d_100_donne_scaricalo_gratis-4779795/)
2020. ‘India’s COVID-19 Challenge: Outcomes and Options’ George Washington University, USA. 15 October.  
<https://youtu.be/WgGZ8ulcug4>
2020. New York, UNDP-UNEP high level dialogue on ‘People and the Planet’, 18 June.  
 Panelists: Bina Agarwal, Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz among others. <https://t.co/r8D5Fg3DNQ?amp=1>
2020. George Washington University, IIEP, USA. ‘India’s COVID-19 Challenge: Outcomes and Option’.  
 Panelists: Bina Agarwal and Raghuram Rajan, 15 Oct.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgGZ8ulcug4>

## Workshops conducted for NGOs

2023. South Africa, Cape Town: workshop for PLAAS, NGO network ‘Women on Farms, and other Civil Society groups, on ‘Women and Land’, 5 July.

2022. University of Cambridge, Centre for History and Economics: co-organised a workshop with Prof. Paul Warde on: 'Is there a case for farmers cooperating', 11-12 November. Attended by invited academics/researchers from the UK, Ireland, France, Norway, and Canada. Also attended by two farmer-practitioners involved in joint ventures.