

# *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:** 2018-

Bina Agarwal is a Professor of Development Economics and Environment at the Global Development Institute, School for Environment, Education and Development at the University of Manchester, UK. She also continues to be affiliated with the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, at which she was former Professor and Director. She will draw on the logistical support of both institutions for taking her research forward.

Agarwal will use the Balzan Prize research funds to pursue three research trajectories under the broad theme: “Institutional innovations, gender and the economy”. Each trajectory, presented as an independent but interrelated project, will involve collaboration with young early-career scholars as well as mid-career and senior colleagues. The projects will also build research capacity among post-Masters and doctoral students by employing them as research analysts or co-partners. In addition, workshops will be organized to share project results with policymakers and civil society, so that the research can have an impact on and make a difference to people’s lives. This would also be in keeping with the larger aims of the Balzan Prize of fostering human well-being.

## **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 will seek 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 already collected by Agarwal in India, France and Romania will be analysed. In the latter two countries, the surveys were undertaken in collaboration with researchers in Europe and the UK.

Apart from fully analysing this survey material, Agarwal will extend the research to additional countries, especially in Europe and former socialist regimes, where group farming is ongoing. In addition to 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. The results will thus be disseminated via seminar presentations and workshops.

Agarwal also plans to continue working with researchers and practitioners in the UK and South Asia, on a range of group farms that were catalysed four years ago through

an action-research project in eastern India and Nepal. Agarwal's writings influenced aspects of this project in its early stages, and she later provided direct inputs to help shape the farm structures. This project constitutes an unusual opportunity to study the process of institution change.

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

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

Yet much more remains to be done, both in research and its application. Under the Balzan project, she will work with two early-career colleagues in India on new data sets (including land records) which can enable an all-India analysis of the extent of gender inequality in property, its regional variations, and its implications for food security, poverty alleviation, children's welfare and women's empowerment.

### **Project 3: Environment and conservation**

This project will extend Agarwal's earlier in-depth research on forest conservation and gender in new directions. In particular, she will examine the ways in which the traditional concept of sacred groves is being used by local communities in the Himalayas to create social barriers to deforestation. For this purpose, a field survey and historical research will be undertaken in collaboration with one of her doctoral students, as well as with a mid-career researcher based in a local institution and a senior colleague at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi.