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Immodest Empowerment: Disjunction Between the Development Agenda and Lived Experiences of "Women's Land Rights" in Southeastern Gujarat

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**IMMODEST EMPOWERMENT: DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN THE DEVELOPMENT
AGENDA AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF “WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS” IN
SOUTHEASTERN GUJARAT**

Nhi Nguyen

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DATE : APRIL 25, 2019

THESIS ADVISORS: DRS. DAVID SPENER, TAHIR NAQVI, AND RICHARD REED

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IMMODEST EMPOWERMENT: DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF “WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS” IN SOUTHEASTERN GUJARAT

A Department Honors Senior Thesis Submitted to the Department of Sociology and
Anthropology at Trinity University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Sociology Honors

By Nhi Nguyen

Thesis Committee: Dr. David Spener, Dr. Tahir Naqvi, and Dr. Richard Reed

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, giving women land rights has been a part of international development organizations' agenda to empower the so-called "Third World woman." Development organizations generalize women's land rights as a cultural and local/state patriarchy issue, and to have "land rights" mostly means to have a documented titling to their family's private agricultural land. Based on one month of fieldwork with the Vasava women in southeastern Gujarat, this thesis exposes the limits of this gender-based and property-based narrative in explaining the experiences of tribal women and land issues. It argues that the supranational development organizations' framework around "women's land rights" poorly addresses the lived experiences of tribal women, because of two main problems. The first problem pertains to how supranational development organizations represent and talk about the tribal women and land, in a way that neglects their social, cultural, and historical contexts. This narrative purposefully obfuscates the complicity of the same development agents in disrupting tribal livelihoods through capitalist projects and blocking tribal women's access to many common forms of land for production. The second problem pertains to the missing voices of women in the land rights agenda. By positing a causal relationship between private land ownership and women's empowerment, development agents provide little space to take into account the tribal women's sentiments, dilemmas, doubts, and complex personal experiences after they gain land titles. The lack of attendance to the women's granular and historically embedded experiences in the development work is what this thesis calls "immodest empowerment."

IMMODEST EMPOWERMENT: DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF “WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS” IN SOUTHEASTERN GUJARAT

INTRODUCTION

In late 2018 when I was a student in southeastern Gujarat, India, there were two simultaneous narratives in the area that tickled my curiosity and prompted this thesis work. In the first narrative, I heard a lot of land rights campaigns from local NGOs and governmental agencies that encouraged tribal families to put their daughters/wives/widows names on the family’s land records¹. In these campaigns, NGOs claimed local inheritance customs and patriarchal values were the main problems that hindered tribal women from their land rights and disempowered them. Without a legal title to agricultural land, these NGOs argued, tribal women were prevented from being officially recognized as farmers and thus were not able to access to governmental programs and support for agriculture. The local NGOs’ campaigns framed women’s land rights as a cultural and local patriarchy issue, and to have “land rights” mostly meant to have a documented titling to their family’s private agricultural land.

In the second narrative, there were huge protests led by local tribal communities in Narmada district against the inauguration of the recently finished Sardar Patel² statue (The Hindu 2018). Although the statue was named “The Statue of Unity,” many local tribes

¹ In the context of southern Gujarat, earning a “land record” or having your name on land documentation also means having a land title. In order to get the land title, a woman needs the consent of the current landholder(s) to either put her name on their documents for joint titling, or to partition the land and give her an independent land record for independent ownership. The local NGOs will offer paralegal workers in each *taluka* to help the women with filling out the necessary paperwork. Together, they will go to the Revenue Department of the village government to initiate the land titling process, which takes approximately 90 days.

² Sardar Patel was India’s first Deputy Prime Minister of India and one of the key leaders in founding the Republic of India. Modi’s government claimed that building this statue would help boost local tourism and thus employment rates.

lampooned it as the “the statue of division.” To the *adivasis* (Indian name for “indigenous people”), the statue symbolized the Indian state’s long-term violence upon the tribal communities and their land rights. The construction of this statue, as well as the nearby Sardar Sarovar Narmada dam projects by the Narmada River, had uprooted many *adivasi* families from their original residence, making many landless. Those who got relocated found themselves in less fertile areas, where they could not have the same access to common resources such as forests and rivers, a condition that impoverished many tribal families.

The protests against the Sardar Patel statue also foregrounded the Indian state’s rampant land-grabbing practice in Gujarat, which authoritatively turned indigenous agricultural and residential lands into those that serve industrial and service purposes (Menon, Kohli, and Gupta 2017). Moreover, the Indian government made little effort to give the *adivasis*’ access to forests. Despite the implementation of the Forest Rights Acts of 2006 to help secure tribal access to the forests, a tortuous bureaucratic process and corrupt officials continued to create barriers that prevented local tribal communities from utilizing forest resources and services (Sonavane and Gandhi 2018). Together, the state’s violation of tribal lands—in service of facilitating internationally-funded development projects—had been destabilizing and worsening the livelihoods of tribal communities. Without a doubt these economic structures directly and adversely affected the *adivasi* women.

Considering the severe impacts of state and capitalist violence on the *adivasi* women in southeastern Gujarat, what struck me at the time was that little about this structural violence was highlighted in local NGOs’ programs for tribal women’ land rights. There were no programs that directly dealt with the tribal women’s issues of landlessness or state’s enclosure or restrictive access to forests and other common landforms. Rather, most of the local NGOs’ programs and

narratives were built as an issue of local, rural patriarchy, where men in tribal societies and village governments were the main antagonists to tribal women's land rights. By positioning tribal women as being precluded by the local patriarchy from obtaining land rights, these NGOs legitimized their intervention and a need to "empower" women by putting their names on their family's agricultural land records. Utilizing the book by the economist Bina Agarwal (1994), *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, international development agents' reports, and other development studies scholarship, the local NGOs explained that women's independent land ownership would help reduce rural poverty, enhance food security, boost agricultural productivity, better children's health and well-being, create an enabling environment for women's agency, and reduce gender-based violence at home.

The missing, or rather suppressed, story about the pervasive violence of development projects upon the Narmada tribal women drove me to question: why were these local NGOs' narratives and programs surrounding women's land rights in southeastern Gujarat mainly based on the premise that land rights was a gendered and property-based issue? Why did local NGOs privilege the narratives of local, rural patriarchy over developmentalist violence? Did these land ownership programs fully address the local tribal women's experiences? These preliminary questions helped me orient the work of this thesis.

What I found (and will present in the following sections) was that local NGOs in Gujarat did not themselves make the narrative of tribal women lacking "land rights" as a local/state patriarchal issue, nor did they create the assertion that having legal land titles would greatly transform their lives. Rather, these narratives were introduced, informed, shaped, guided, and constrained by a broader international development epistemology, which influenced local NGO staff's training. "Women's land rights" is part of larger international development agencies'

projects to “intervene” and “help” the so-called “Third World women.” By constructing them as a homogenous subject that is purportedly oppressed by their local societies and cultures, supranational development organizations gained legitimacy in producing knowledge and prescribing solutions to save these Third World women. While enhancing the moral reputations of development agencies as promoters of gender equality in the Third World³, such a narrative also helps obscure the violence of capitalist industrial development projects funded by the same “saviors” in these areas.

My fieldwork with the women of Vasava, a clan of the Bhil tribe living in southeastern Gujarat, exposes the limits of this gender-based narrative in explaining the experiences of tribal women and land issues. Although gender is important, Moeller (2008:12) suggests that the sole reliance of “the concept of ‘woman’ as the central analytical category” obscures the “identities, experiences, conditions, and power relations lived across multiple social, cultural, economic, political, religious, and geographic locations.” Hegemonic Western and Anglo-American feminisms “often reduce and/or mask” the multitudes of women’s experiences into “gender as the ‘single axis’” (Moeller 2018:12). Likewise, since Vasava women’s livelihoods were continuously molded by the violent structure created during British colonization and perpetuated by postcolonial development projects, posing tribal women’s problems with land as a gender-based or local patriarchal issue is insufficient. Moreover, recognizing that Vasava women’s experiences are embedded in intersecting social, historical, and affective layers also complicates the narratives of women’s having their names on family’s land records as empowering. Giving

³ I am aware that there are more updated terms such as “the Global South” or “lower-income countries” to replace obsolete names such as “less-developed,” or “Third World” countries. However, in this paper, I still use the term Third World to call attention to the tone of the development agencies for pathologizing a concept that once denoted non-aligned countries, in order to reset the world’s power dynamics. Moreover, I use the term to emphasize their imaginary of these geographies and the subjects that exist within them.

women land documents does not change the material and structural conditions that impoverish the Vasava community and simultaneously diminish the tribal women's status.

This thesis argues that the international development agencies' narratives and work around "women's land rights" is inadequate to reflect the lived experiences of tribal women. There are two main problems with their gender- and property-based narratives and works. The first problem pertains to how supranational development organizations represent and talk about the women and land, in a way that neglects their social, cultural, and historical contexts. The development agenda reduce forces of oppression to an essentialist patriarchal system, and confine the scope of "land rights" to mostly registered, private land ownership. As a result, they obfuscate the systemic violence of capitalism and the Euro-centric governance model—imposed by past British colonizers and also by current development projects—on the tribal community and their women's relationship to unregistered common lands. The second problem pertains to the missing voices of women in the land rights agenda. By insisting on an "empowering" approach that links private land ownership to improvements in women's wellbeing, development agents provide little space to take into account the tribal women's sentiments, dilemmas, doubts, and complex personal experiences related to the lived realities of gaining land titles.

Emphatically speaking, my work is not a rejection to any claim that tribal women should have agricultural land documents, nor is it a personal attack directed to any specific NGOs. I acknowledge many important services that local NGOs and networks bring forth, as well as the multiple constraints (e.g. funding, donors' demands) that these organizations face. For example, with the network of NGOs I worked with in Gujarat, these services included the establishment of paralegal centers that assist tribal women and their families with legal advice, or paperwork instructions on how to put the women's names on the land documents. This thesis also accredits

local NGOs' efforts to raise awareness local governments' officials about the local women and their discrimination in the land titling process. It also acknowledges the local NGOs for trying their best to expand the scope of "land rights" beyond private land ownership and to more diverse activity engagements with lands.

This work is also not an assessment on how good, bad, efficient, or futile specific NGOs' efforts are. Similarly, it does not aim to prescribe alternative solutions to correct the NGOs' approach to women's land rights. Rather, this thesis attempts to understand the epistemology of gender mainstreaming and development, specifically in the case of how agricultural land ownership was problematized and believed to be a transformative solution to women's social plight, and how the development feminist agenda, through "empowering" the "poor woman," inadvertently undermines the voices and strips away the complex historicized and socially embedded experiences of local womanhood. In this paper, these unvoiced subjects are exemplified by the Vasava women.

Outline

After the upcoming methodology, this thesis has two main sections. As local NGOs adopted numerous narratives on "women's land rights" from international development organizations' framework, as well as oriented their agenda on tribal women under the influence of development and corporate philanthropist funders⁴, the first main section will discuss the origin and epistemology of development as a domain of thought and action. This section will provide background for how international development agencies came to identify not having documented land titling as the "Third World woman's" issue caused by local/state patriarchy. Promoting the image of the oppressive "Third World man" versus the oppressed, unaware "Third

⁴ See note 18.

World woman,” development agencies legitimize their intervention roles in “empowering” these women by giving them land rights. What “land rights” constitutes, according to development agencies, was reduced solely to gaining land documents. This limited conceptualization of land rights by development agencies accomplishes three things. First, it promotes the image of a problematic Third World where cultural values and local/state customs do not allow women to legally own land and where development agencies are the saviors. Second, it promotes sedentary farming on private land as a predominant production form, and thus dismisses diverse forms of land stewardship that many communities rely on that the same development agencies’ projects are undermining. Third, it allows supranational development organizations to legitimize their roles in creating intervention model and perpetuate Western structures in tribal societies.

The second main section of the paper will return to my fieldwork in Gujarat. It explores how development narratives and writings about women’s land rights insufficiently speak to the granular experiences of the Vasava women in the Narmada area. In order to do so, the section starts off with reviewing how local NGOs play intermediary roles in translating the international development paradigm of women’s land rights to tribal women. After that, the thesis looks at how the development framework fails to match the Vasava women’s socially and historically embedded relations with land. By problematizing concepts such as local patriarchy, land ownership, or land-as-property, the thesis highlights the direct involvement of colonial forces and postcolonial development projects in creating and perpetuating what they now see as cultural or local customs problems. It also exposes the complicity of development agencies in destroying other forms of common land that Vasava women rely on for production. The last part of the section tells the stories of two Vasava women I interviewed, and explores their nuanced, everyday experiences of owning land. This part attends to the voices of women that are usually

overlooked in development agenda on land rights and its totalizing claim of a positive correlation between private land ownership and women's wellbeing. It also addresses my struggles with communicating with the women in the field that leads to some limitations of the study.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the narratives from the international development agencies, I reviewed primary documents, reports, infographics, and blogs around “women's land rights” from institutions and organizations such as Landesa Rural Development Institute, the World Bank, the UN Women, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Since my work mostly deals with how these international narratives on women's land ownership agenda take place on a local level, I conducted my study for almost a month (November 11 to December 8, 2018) in the southeastern part of Gujarat, India (see Figure 1). This area drew my attention because it has the greatest concentration of tribal peoples. It also has high incidences of industrial projects and dam constructions on large rivers (e.g. Narmada River) that excluded the tribal peoples from their agricultural lands and common resources. Considering the history and current context of the area, this area allows me to explore the significance of documented land ownership to tribal women, who have been systematically marginalized by long-term structural violence.

With the intent to understanding how local NGOs translate development framework of “women's land rights” to the tribal women, I worked with the network League of Women's Rights⁵ (LWR) in the first and fourth week of my fieldwork. Based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, this local network is comprised of several local NGO members, community-based organizations, and individuals that work specifically on the issue of women's agricultural land ownership. I

⁵ All local network, NGOs, their staff, the paralegal workers, and programs (e.g. “legal advocacy center”) names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

participated in their meetings and trainings for paralegal workers, where I observed and documented how the LWR staff oriented their activities, and formed narratives around women's land ownership. I also conducted in-depth, personal interviews with their convener, the staff of the group, and their paralegal workers⁶ in Besna⁷ and Nivalda *talukas*⁸ in southeastern Gujarat. My questions usually centered on how the staff problematized women's land rights, what empowerment means, and what programs they focused on to support the tribal women with land access and use.

I learned about the personal experiences of tribal women with land and legal titling through two different approaches. In the first approach, I aimed to contextualize the larger social and historical conditions of the Bhil tribe to explore what "land" means to the Vasava women and their community through time. By reviewing of the history of the Bhil in the area through earlier works of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, I discovered that concepts such as documented land titling or local/state patriarchy have been values produced and imposed by colonial and postcolonial agents to the tribe. Ethnographic accounts of Amita Baviskar (1995) and Judith Whitehead (2010) also help explain how the Bhil's gender and land relations have been transformed through different historical periods and postcolonial economic events.

In the second approach, I aimed to listen to the tribal women's personal experiences after owning land record. To do this, I conducted interviews with a total of nine Vasava womens: three widows in Besna, and five widows and a single woman in Nivalda. Following the first

⁶ During the second and third weeks when I was in Besna and Nivalda (these *talukas*' names were switched), I visited the legal advocacy center in each *taluka*, where LWR's paralegal workers help other village women to fill out legal papers that transfer their names on the family land record. Talking to the paralegal workers on the *taluka* level allowed me to better understand and reaffirm that LWR and PRI's main focus is still on legal land ownership for women in "landed" household.

⁷ The thesis has switched the *talukas*' names.

⁸ *Taluka* is an administrative unit that can be considered a sub-district in the Indian context. A *taluka* unit has many villages within it.

week with LWR in Ahmedabad, I moved to southeastern Gujarat and lived for two weeks on the office campus of one of LWR's NGO partners, the Program for Rural Integration (PRI). Every weekday, I took a bus or got a motorcycle ride to Besna (in the second week) and Nivalda (in the third week) to visit the LWR's paralegal workers on each block and the Vasava women. I could not stay in the village because I could not find any women who were willing to host me, and if I could have, I would also have had language barriers preventing me from communicating with them on an everyday basis.

The PRI introduced me to the women that they had helped in the past to own land records. With the translating assistance (from Gujarati to English) from PRI staff, I could partly communicate with the women and understand more about their nuanced lives. All interviews took place in a safe space without the presence of men. This paper also uses pseudonyms to refer to the Vasava women to protect their identities.

There are many challenges during these interview sessions. First, I had no control over to whom I could speak. My visits with women were completely dependent on PRI translator's scheduling and the women's availability. Despite the limitations, the meetings with the Vasava women allowed me to witness and understand their nuanced emotions and quandaries during and after getting land title.

Second, before entering the field, the LWR convener Kaveri put pressure on my original proposal and the trajectory that my research would take. Initially, I was interested in understanding the everyday realities of Vasava women after owning a land title, and if having names in legal records greatly empowers or gives the women benefits like the development data suggested. LWR's convener interpreted my attempt to be critical as an attack on LWR's work and to reject that women should ever own land. Thus, she told me that she expected me to be

“open-minded,” which until now I did not understand what that fully meant. For this reason, in order to maintain my relationship with her and finish my studies, I had to reorient my work to study the “good” aspects of LWR’s agenda. This made me prepare more questions on how land theoretically positively changed the woman’s life, rather than delving into more nuanced realities of women’s land ownership.

Third, unlike LWR’s description on their website—which cited Agarwal (1994)’s work suggesting that women who own land face less domestic violence—some of my informants still go through violence and contradictory emotions during the process of filing land paperwork and after having land titles. This violence not only takes physical and verbal forms, but also through everyday passive aggression. As emotional as these stories could be, I found it inappropriate to delve further them by asking the informants more questions on these sensitive and triggering stories in just one interview, especially since I had just met them and was a stranger to them. At the same time, NGOs’ staff only allowed me to meet each woman once, so I could not have a chance to develop deeper relationships and unpack other complicated parts of the everyday realities of owning land.

Fourth, during the whole interviewing process, translators were PRI staff (both male and female) translating my interviewee’s responses from Gujarati to English. Relying on translators that were development NGO staff was problematic and challenging. During the interviews with male translators, I noticed that they did not completely translate the responses of the women, because the length of the translations was much shorter than women’s responses. In addition, translators usually disregarded asking the women my questions, but rather answered on the women’s behalf immediately after I posed the questions. Sometimes their translations seemed to repeat the technical things that I had read on their organizations’ websites or simply interpret the

women's responses through their own lenses, rather than giving verbatim translations of the women's responses. The PRI female staff who helped me translate conversations in Nivalda made more space for the women's voice. As a tribal member herself, she seemed not to be shy about exposing the ongoing problems which the women explained that they had after gaining land ownership. Her honesty and willingness to contextualize what the women were saying in the tribal cultures, or to give me background information about the tribal customs, helped me better understand what the women articulated about the experiences with gaining land titles.

SECTION ONE: "WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS" IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS

In order to shed light on how development agencies conceptualize Third World women's identities and how they identify their name's absence on family's records as a "women's land rights" issue, it is essential to understand the paradigm in which these discourses (e.g. "empowerment," "women's land rights") are enfolded—namely development. Seeing development not as a self-evident or natural expectation of all nations, but rather a terrain of thoughts and actions created by the West to maintain its hegemony after the colonial period, this section first explores the rationale behind development to explain why and how development agents are engaged in creating knowledge and intervening on non-Western lives, and ultimately Third World women.

Contextualizing development discourse

The Post World War II period (from the 1940s to 1970s) was the era of decolonization, when former colonies started to gain independence from the Western colonizers and build their own nation-states. The United States administration took advantage of this transitional period to reorient the global economic power structure, consolidate the U.S. position in the new

geopolitical climate, and compel newly independent countries (NICs) to incorporate themselves into the capitalist industrial system. Initially helping the European countries to rebuild their economies through the Marshall Plan (or rather, to contain communism and advance capitalism in these countries), the U.S. government created institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as international plans and programs (e.g. The Public Law 480) to provide loans, planning agenda, and development models to the NICs. All of these new infrastructures and institutions were established in the name of “development.” To emphasize, “development” here aims more at “productive” investments, such as energy (e.g. dams, highways, power plants), rather than “social” improvement, such as education, health services, housing, etc. that fits the specific and cultural contexts (McMichael 2012:59). For example, the World Bank prioritized to issue loans to states for capital-intensive projects that used the U.S. expertise and technological inputs (e.g. dam construction), and to invest in large-scale cash crop production and industrialized agriculture (e.g. The Green Revolution). These projects of development advanced the U.S.’s imprint on these countries by imposing capitalist structures and Western social governance model, and making the NIC recipients depend on them through loans, technological inputs, and food dependency.

Development as a Western power-knowledge regime

Development is not a benign, apolitical project in which former colonizers help their colonies to recover from the aftermath of century-long theft and abuse, or fashion this support in a way that fits the NICs’ own cultural, social, and historical contexts. Instead, development is a Western economic and political project to maintain its superior position over the non-West. Development extends the colonial legacy of presenting “the West” as the modern, rational, pinnacle of civilization, and therefore, the “model, the prototype and the measure of social

progress” (Hall 1992:313). Its proponents foreground the elements that constitute “the West”—high levels of industrialization and urbanization, advanced science, rapid growth of financial capital, material production, and living standards, the adoption of modern education, institutions, and cultural values—as benchmarks for other non-Western communities to replicate and pursue (Escobar 1994, McMichael 2012). By reiterating and naturalizing Western modernity’s belief in the linearity of “progress” (Gupta 1998:36), development agents created categories such as “underdeveloped,” “developing,” and “developed countries” to situate nation-states along a normalized linear and evolutionary sequence of growth. Less developed countries (LDCs), or the so-called “Third World,” are presented as backward and deficient. Such narratives provided legitimacy for development agents to learn about and find out their “problems” (certainly, these “problems” are compatible with the established system of Western knowledge and power) (Escobar 1994:45), and thus help them to catch up with the “developed countries”.

The process of “bringing the Third World into the politics of expert knowledge and Western science” also gives development the power to formulate, create, and give certain forms of knowledge the status of “truth” (Escobar 1994:45). Development agents further consolidated their authority over defining objects, concepts, and strategies through creating institutions (e.g. the World Bank, United Nations, the International Monetary Fundings, etc.), formalizing socioeconomic processes (e.g. industrialization, urbanization, agricultural technicalization, national planning, creation of financial institutions, fiscal policies), establishing and privileging certain forms of knowledge (e.g. demographic-based statistical data, knowledge about crop productivity, etc.), and promoting fields of expertise (e.g. economists, demographers, plant geneticists, gender experts, etc.) (Escobar 1994). As a result, development practitioners quickly gained the upper-hand on setting the standards of how problems, theories, objects are named,

analyzed, interpreted, and translated into mainstream policies or plans (Escobar 1994:41). They also create parameters, indicators, categories, and assign them meanings that align with Western epistemology, development knowledge, and capitalist interests.

Two major mechanisms of how development agents produce knowledge about LDCs and their subjects are: (1) the heavy reliance on certain kinds of standardized and aggregate statistics: national income, employment, trade, output, population, etc., and (2) the representation of the Third World subjects as homogenous beings. In the first mechanism, development organizations rely on statistical data because it can fulfill their desire to measure, calculate, and quantify Third World conditions and experiences. This quantifying lens allows them to identify the purportedly “lacking” qualities in these “less developed” countries to intervene. It is undeniable that when statistical data is set up in a critical, self-reflexive, and historicized process, it provides invaluable inputs concerning structural issues, or social inequality experienced by groups of people. However, in the terrain of development knowledge production, this data can become problematic. Escobar (1994:44) points out how this data’s problematic use resulted from the fact that they were produced and translated through “a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in charts of progress, and thus in need of “a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions”. Furthermore, international development agencies’ heavy emphasis and reliance on statistical data as prime knowledge sources and “truth” indicators, however, effaces the particularities of diverse local conditions and their subjective experiences. Numbers in statistical data cannot fully capture the Third World subjects’ complex social, historical, cultural, and affective aspects, and thus, they do “not always reveal what the

experience of everyday life means for people in particular ‘development regime’” (Gupta 1998:38).

Secondly, development agents tend to present Third World subjects as universal, preconstituted beings, which share the pathological and deficient conditions that need Western and capitalist interventions (Escobar 1994). The practice of effacing the diversity of Third World peoples, and clumping them into decontextualized social categories or figures, is what Escobar (1994:53) calls the problems of “discursive homogenization.” He illustrates how “a squatter in Mexico City, a Nepalese peasant, and a Tuareg nomad become equivalent to each other as poor and underdeveloped” (53). The inclination to generalize Third World experiences also explains why development agents think that problems they define can be treated by the same, “replicable and largely ahistorical models” of interventions (Gupta 1998:38).

The “Third World woman” figure in development

Although the basic intent and structure of development has remained unchanged, development agents have continually searched for new groups of population to incorporate into their agenda. From the late 1970s until today, development has brought into existence a new “client category”: women (Escobar 1994:155). Here, women means “poor,” rural Third World women, most of whom still practice agriculture as the dominant subsistence activity. Using the same discursive homogenization technique, development agencies clump the vast and diverse experiences of womanhood from disparate communities, cultures, and histories, into a mythical “Third World woman” figure (Mohanty 1984, Trinh 1989). This figure suggests that Third World women’s experiences all share the same pathologized characteristics (Spivak 1990)—such as being poor, lacking awareness, illiterate, oppressed by local patriarchy—whose universalized

experience can be understood through sex-/gender-disaggregated data and cured by the same, replicable models of interventions (Gupta 1998).

International development approaches on how to understand and intervene on behalf of the “Third World woman’s” condition, however, were never unanimous and definite. They evolved over time, in accordance with the feminist framework for development’s changing visions of the “woman,” her roles and conditions within the larger social structure (Sharma 2008). Different conceptualizations of Third World women and their problems shape different ways development agents analyze the collected data and address women’s concerns within development. This section explores the timeframe when supranational development organizations started to become more interested in Third World women as a targeted population, and how, through different periods, they created a different agenda (i.e. gender mainstreaming), standards, metrics (e.g. the need for sex-/gender-specific data), and narratives (e.g. women are oppressed by patriarchy), as a way to understand and intervene on this “woman” subject. It reveals that, as development agencies give themselves authority and prominent roles in producing knowledge about Third World women, they also reinforce the role of these development agents in “saving” and intervening in these women’s lives and their communities. In the present time, those interventions are dressed in language such as “empowerment.”

Changing conceptualizations of the “Third World woman” in development

Before the 1970s, international and national development agents mostly framed rural, Third World women in their reproductive roles as wives and mothers (Sharma 2008). Up to the end of the 1970s, development agenda still portrayed these women as “mothers engaged in feeding babies, pregnant or lactating, procuring water for cooking and cleaning, dealing with children’s disease, or growing some food in the home garden for family diet” (Escobar

1994:172). Since most of agriculture experts and development staff working up to that time were male, they based their knowledge of gender on Western notion of division of labor, such as “agriculture for men, home economics for women” (Escobar 1994:172-173).

Starting in 1970, a group of feminist political economists, scholars, and practitioners—who developed the discursive paradigm named Women in Development (WID)—emerged and critiqued the notion of women as passive, rebutting the notion that women were only confined to home-making and subsistence activities (Kardam 1991). WID supporters and practitioners such as Carolyn Sachs (1985) argued that such a vision makes invisible women’s contributions in the productive sphere such as agricultural production. Sharma (2018) reveals that international development agencies—such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation—responded to and translated this WID logic into development programs, where they constructed the “woman” as productive agents whose full potential and capacity must be tapped for economic growth. She also explains that these organizations began to see “women’s inclusion in development would result in an efficient allocation of resources and was a sound economic strategy” (5).

This period—when development agencies shifted their characterizing of the “Third World woman” from reproductive/passive/self-sufficient/invisible to productive/active/economically-efficient/visible—marked the increasing visibility of women in the international and national development discourse (Escobar 1994). The new visibility made Third World women become a new subject of interest that development agents feel the need to learn about and provide interventions (Escobar 1994:179). In the early 1980s, Escobar (1994:184) points out that one can see a burgeoning “international climate favorable to policies targeting [poor, rural] women” not only in the planning agenda of international development

agencies,⁹ but also in many Third World countries' agenda. Countries such as India started to incorporate women as an important component into national planning (Agarwal 1994).

Development agents also encouraged more knowledge production on Third World women. For example, United Nations Decade for Women "promoted research on women, channeled funds to women's projects, and put First World feminists in touch with Third World women's activities, who, in turn, disseminated feminist knowledge among the women's groups with which they worked" (Escobar 1994:184).

Women's "empowerment" approach as the current regime of intervention

After 1990, a new approach to Third World women arose as a critique of WID: Gender and Development (GAD). GAD scholars critiqued WID's efficiency-based rationales and narrow definition of women within a cost-based model and economic productivity sense (Sen and Grown 1987). Thus, they viewed WID's paradigm as limited, because it does not address the patriarchal elements in cultural values and socioeconomic structures that subordinate the women's status. Instead of seeing the "woman" as economically productive agents whose exclusion from economic participation was the problem, GAD scholars and practitioners identified gender discrimination in many forms, including biases against women in local culture, development programs, state policies and structures, as well as women's limited participation in making economic policy, as the major problems (Rigat-Pflaum 2008, translated by Alvarado 2009).

GAD's approach gave rise to the idea of *gender mainstreaming*, which urges states to recognize "the real differences that exist between women and men as social subjects, and the need to consider the effect of macro policies on the sexual division of labor" (Escobar 1994:187,

⁹ For more details, see Escobar (1994:178)

cited from León 1993¹⁰). This new approach to women mandated the inclusion of women and their perspectives in the making and practicing of development programs. It is important to clarify that GAD did not deny WID's conceptualization and premise that the "Third World woman" is productive and an important resource for the economic sphere. However, it extends WID by highlighting the condition of being suppressed and disempowered by social and cultural patriarchy that curbs their economic participation.¹¹ The expansion of how GAD advocates view women's issues also drove them to formulate new mechanisms of gathering knowledge about women, as well as change the narratives on how to intervene on women's behalf.

Identifying structural and cultural patriarchy as a bigger hurdle to women, GAD scholars and practitioners also see the need to change their approaches to the "woman" subject. Rather than emphasizing (though not denying) women as economic agents, GAD theorists use "empowerment" as an ideal strategy for undoing hierarchies and enforcing large-scale social change. "Empowerment" strategies stress the need to make the oppressed aware and critical of multiple oppressive situations. GAD advocates adopted this "empowerment" term and strategy from the radical Brazilian pedagogue Paolo Freire. In his renowned work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) explained that since the oppressed condition is normalized, they themselves are not fully aware of the structure of domination that creates their struggle. He suggested a model of education as "conscientization" that would help the "oppressed" to become aware of the various systems of subordination, and to free themselves from the structures of

¹⁰ León (1993)'s work is in Spanish, so I relied on Escobar (1994:187) for translation.

¹¹ Escobar (1994:187, citing León 1993:17) wrote, "The empowerment approach seeks 'to transform the terms under which women are linked to productive activities in such a way that economic, social, and cultural equality of their participation is insured' (León 1993:17). The result would be public policies with a gender perspective that do not subordinate empowerment to the goals of productivity."

political domination. Freire's model of liberation must not be exercised by a top-down method, but must begin from the perspectives of the marginalized (a point that GAD feminists also emphasized). Even though GAD practitioners use Freire's empowerment approach to make women (the oppressed) aware of the multiple patriarchal power structures, they do not critique the work of development itself. This vision was different from Freire's, who does not align himself with developmentalism as a solution for social inequalities.

As progressive as empowerment sounds, Sharma (2008:29) argues that empowerment is "neither self-evidently good, nor bad, nor neutral, but dangerous". Empowerment is dangerous because cursory understandings of empowerment history will easily deceive readers that its practice and definition remains consistent across institutions and actors. Today, empowerment is a prevalent term, message, and/or concept used by development international agencies to describe their approaches to women. Use of empowerment as a feminist branding increasingly appeared in the mission statements of major financial and development organizations such as the World Bank, the micro-lending Grameen Foundation, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Leary 2017). However, the current connotation of empowerment, when translated into the practice of development NGOs and supranational organizations, is distant from the radical meanings and practices of Freire, because it only focuses on the dominant structure of patriarchy. Unlike the message to contest hegemony in radical liberation movements, such as those of Paulo Freire and Mahatma Gandhi, "empowerment" is employed by international development agencies to justify women's participation in capitalist norms. In *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, Leary (2017:76-78) explains and critiques what empowerment denotes according to the OECD:

...empowerment as “the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways which recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth.” The implication is that “participation” by necessity yields “fairness”: it is “exclusion” from participation in economy, rather than the economy itself, that disempowers...Here, as well, the discourse of empowerment is driven by a celebration of individual participation in structures of authority, and less by a critique of the structures themselves.

In short, development agents who use the discourse of women’s empowerment challenge the structure of patriarchy, but do so in service of a global hegemony of development and capitalism.

Women’s agricultural land rights discourse

In the booklet “Realizing Women’s Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources,” the UN Women (2013:1) explains the issues involved as follows:

Land itself can be understood to include farmland, wetland, pasture, rangeland, fishery, forest, as well as harvesting and hunting territories. Throughout this publication the phrase “women’s rights to land” must be understood holistically and in a manner which is grounded in the international human rights framework. These rights entail the ability of women to own, use, access, control, transfer, inherit, and otherwise take decisions about land and related resources. They also encompass women’s rights to secure land tenure and to meaningfully participate at all stages of land law, policy, and programme development, from assessment and analysis, programme planning and design, budgeting and financing, and

implementation, to monitoring and evaluation. Women's land rights must also be understood in the context of intersecting forms of discrimination.

“Women's rights to land” in the UN Women's definition suggests the extensive meanings of what land rights entail. The term “land” encapsulates not only (privately owned) agricultural land, but also diverse common landforms (e.g. forest, wetland, pasture, rangeland, etc.) and natural resources (e.g. fruits, forest resources, games, implied in “harvesting and hunting territories”). Likewise, the term “rights to land” denotes the range of activities of what women could undertake on land that goes beyond legal ownership. These activities also include the ability to “use, access, control, transfer, inherit, and take decisions” in legislative processes about the extensive landforms and resources mentioned above.

Counter-development/alter-globalization scholars also discussed land rights that align with this holistic definition of land rights. For example, ecofeminist scholars such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) emphasize the role of capitalism and development projects in excluding women in many communities from multiple landforms and thus obstructing their extensive ways of production. These narratives describe an expansive range of “women's land rights” that are beyond private agricultural land and the ownership of documentation.

Despite this holistic approach in the UN Women booklet, in practice, most international development organizations—who are main funders/donors of local NGOs and ultimately influence the focus of their work¹²—reduce women's land rights to one's legal status in land registration system (World Bank 2016b). Such interpretation is not arbitrary, but rather aligns with development agents' increasing interest in small landholding farmers as entrepreneurs¹³ (Escobar 1994), and with private property ownership as a purportedly normative human-land

¹² See note 18.

¹³ For more information, read Escobar (1994:156-171).

relations. Development agencies also prefer legal records as indicators of women having land rights, because they can be quantified, and thus provide easier reference for them to track and evaluate the local NGOs' work.¹⁴ Development translation of land rights obscures the many unregistered, common landforms that women in many communities rely on for production. It also overlooks the range of women's activities with lands that secure their livelihoods. Most importantly, this definition of land rights implicitly sets the conditions for only women in landed household, because landless women do not even have lands to have documentations.

Narratives around women's land rights in development agenda

Landesa Rural Development Institute, based in Seattle, is a well-known global development group that works on land rights. Specifically, Landesa works to help poor families register and obtain legal title to their lands. Landesa (2019) believes that having documented land titles will help the poor "to lift themselves out of poverty," since people will have secured land, can invest in their land, boost agricultural yields, and earn a better living through improved nutrition, health, and education. Landesa receives the majority of its funding from private-sector benefactors such as private foundation grants, individual donations, and development agencies. Some of the funders include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Nike, the Omidvar Network (founded by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar (Holtzman 2011)). In addition, Landesa also partners with corporate philanthropists, national governments, world leaders, and development agencies such as the World Bank, the USAID, and the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), to

¹⁴ Other influential sources that the World Bank and other international development organizations relied on to define women's land rights are WID and GAD scholars' works. During the 1970s, WID and GAD feminist scholars critiqued the pre-WID development agenda in agriculture as male-biased, which saw men as landholders as normative. Scholars such as Bina Agarwal (1994) and Carmen Deere and Magdalena Leon (2001) revealed how not owning land reduced women's wellbeing and their productivity in agricultural production. This was especially relevant during the current feminization of agriculture as men had to migrate and work in wage labor. Together, these feminist economists proposed women's independent land ownership would help empower the women.

circulate and exchange knowledge about land rights, and implementation of land laws, policies, and programs in so-called “Third World countries” that aligns with the framework of development.

In 2009, Landesa launched its Center for Women’s Land Rights, marking their increasing interest on including Third World women in the land rights¹⁵ agenda. Since that time, together with the World Bank, FAO, USAID, and other development scholars and experts, Landesa has produced publications, narratives, images, and infographics around the problem of women not having legal land titles. Landesa quickly emerged as a leading expert in women’s agricultural land ownership, whose publications became a source of reference and citations that many governments, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or networks—including LWR—referred to. This subsection will look into how Landesa and its partners exemplify the way international development agents represent Third World women and problematize women’s land ownership. It shows that by using the techniques of statistical data and discursive homogenization, Landesa portrays women’s land rights narratives in three main predominant tropes.

First, Landesa attributed women’s agricultural land rights to a Third World local/nation-state patriarchy issue, where men living in these countries and communities purportedly uphold a culture and structure that prevent women from being formally entitled to land. Second, by identifying Third World men, cultures, and national systems as antagonists, development agents construct the figure of the “Third World woman” and assign her with pathologized attributes such as lacking awareness about land ownership and legal system to have land title, being accustomed to patriarchal oppression, and thus in need of outside interventions to raise her

¹⁵ To emphasize, similar to Landesa’s former programs and incentives, land rights here denotes the ownership of private, registered land.

awareness and empower her. Third, after essentializing women's land ownership as a problem with local/state patriarchy, and with women's lacking awareness, these development agencies legitimize their roles to help. By creating a universal, replicable, ahistorical, and technocratic model of intervention for the mythical Third World woman figure, development agencies dictate that women's documented, private land ownership will help empower them, and ignore the multiple culturally-specific women and land relations.

Local patriarchy as the oppressor

Landesa's website displays numerous reports and infographics to educate the public audience about why women should have private, legal land ownership. Among these includes an infographic named "The Law of The Land and The Case for Women's Land Rights" (see Figure 2), in which the organization introduces and summarizes the problems of women with land rights: "In more than half of all countries, laws or customs hinder women's ownership or access to land, undermining women's empowerment" (Landesa 2016).

Underneath the lead sentence was an image of global map which splits the world into halves: the "developed" countries (in white color) and the "less developed" countries (marked in yellow). Women land ownership is suggested to be the problem of the latter. Landesa frames that in these countries, legislative laws and cultural customs are causes that undermine women's ownership and access to land. The infographic went on to provide some data and numbers to demonstrate this gender gap in terms of land ownership on a global scale:

15 countries where women do not have equal ownership rights to property.

34 countries where daughters do not have equal inheritance rights.

35 countries where widows do not have equal inheritance rights.

90 countries where customs inhibit women's access to land.

Yet, globally more than 400 million women farm.

Gathering data and numbers from institutions such as OECD and the World Bank, Landesa's poster provides a general landscape of how Third World women are discriminated against in comparison to those in "developed countries." The identified antagonists in the Third World women's land issues are local customs (e.g. patrilineal inheritance rights and other local customs inhibiting women's access to land) and Third World nation-state structures (e.g. national legislation and bureaucratic process). Similar to the Landesa poster, in the booklet "Realizing Women's Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources," the UN Women (2014:2) identifies the issue of Third World women not having land rights as a problem of "inadequate legal standards and/or ineffective implementation at national and local levels, as well as discriminatory cultural attitudes and practices at the institutional and community level." Nowhere in these narratives highlighted the roles of Western development institutions and agencies, such as the World Bank and its experts, who set up and standardized male-biased values within development frameworks that local actors were influenced/forced to emulate.

The Third World women's "lack of awareness"

Besides the patriarchy in the Third World nation-state structure and local cultural values, Landesa and development partners also attribute the Third World women themselves as causes of their problems with land rights. Using the technique of homogenizing and pathologizing Third World women, the organization assigns women with passive traits such as lacking awareness or accustomed to patriarchy to explain why women themselves are also reasons for their own disempowered status. To give a clearer piece of evidence on how these development agents talk

about the women, I will refer to other Landesa's report on women's land rights project¹⁶ in West Bengal, India (see Figure 3). In a report, Landesa (2018:2) frames the issue as follows:

...barriers begin early in life. Obstacles between women and these land-related benefits often begin early in life...In India, girls and women are responsible for much of the labor on land, and the law allows women to access, own, and inherit land. But in practice, a number of factors often deny women these rights. Even before they are women, girls are not well positioned to realize their land rights. In India, early-life obstacles include ... lack of knowledge...Generally, girls in India are unaware of what their land rights are, the institutions and processes that are key to realizing them, and the elements and benefits of having land rights...

In this narrative, the women were described as lacking knowledge and unaware of their own rights and the legal system to realize these rights. It repeats the Western feminists' tendency in portraying Third World women not only as victims of patriarchy (Mohanty 1984, Trinh 1989), but also passive (Spivak 1990) and uninformed that they do not question their own experience of oppression. The narrative of how women are not aware of their situation sets up a context in which Landesa and its development agents legitimize their interventions, by raising women awareness about their subordinate status for not owning land like men, and empowering them through getting land title. The next subsection will explore how Landesa uses statistical data and development scholarship to moralize and create "truths" about their interventions, where a replicable and ahistorical model of land documentation is believed to have the same positive effects on Third World women's lives, regardless of where they live.

¹⁶ This project was partnered with The Girl Project.

Legitimization of interventions

Similar to how its development partners use numerical data to problematize women not owning land titles as a Third World issue, Landesa uses statistical data to formulate an intervention model which suggests that land ownership will significantly empower women. Landesa's narratives exemplify how development agents legitimize that women's documented, private land ownership will positively transform women. These narratives, again, perpetuate development hegemony, which dictates legal land ownership as the main form of land relation that universally apply to women from all societies, cultures, and communities.

In order to explain how legally owning land empower women, Landesa (2015) composed another infographic poster named "A Better World: Strengthening Women's Land Rights"¹⁷ (see Figure 4). Landesa identified six measures of how women's land ownership will improve women and their children's well-being. The poster depicts a faceless woman figure holding a child, with six surrounding boxes that list reasons why women should have land titles:

Prosperous: Women with strong property and inheritance rights earn up to 3.8 times more income.

Nourished: Children whose mothers own lands are up to 33% less likely to be severely underweight.

Educated: Families where women own more land devote more of their budget to education.

Safer: Women who own land are up to 8 times less likely to experience domestic violence.

¹⁷ "Land rights" here means legal ownership of private land.

Resilient: Where women's property and inheritance rights are stronger, women's individual savings are up to 35 percent greater.

Healthy: Children in households where women own land are up to 10% less likely to be sick.

Before delving into how these statistical data in reinforcing development hegemony of homogenizing experience and dictating independent land ownership as the only and dominant form of land use, it is important to contextualize how these data are created. Statistical data on “prosperous,” “nourished,” “educated,” “safer,” “resilient,” and “healthy” were taken from mostly development or economic journals. These include *World Development*, *Journal of Human Development*, *The Journal of Development Studies*, and *Journal of African Economies*. Although I have not yet discussed the validity of these statistical results, it is important to keep in mind that these studies are produced within the development and economic epistemology. This means these studies' indicators and variables are also produced and defined by development metrics and framework, usually from a Western-centric and capitalist-oriented measurement. For example, the inclusion aspects such as increasing “income” or “individual savings” as positives reflects a Eurocentric and capitalist-oriented vision of progress. “Education,” “nourished,” and “health” were also produced and defined based on a Western perspective.

Next, in terms of the infographic content, these quantitative data were compiled from case studies that took place in various countries and ethnic communities. For example, the “prosperous” argument on increasing income was collected from a region in Tanzania, the “educated” argument was based on a study about Ghana, the “nourished” argument was from Nepal, the “safer” argument was from Southern India (Kerala), and the “healthy” argument was from Vietnam. However, in the portrayal of Landesa's infographic, these various data collected

from other countries somehow constitute the purportedly universal “Third World woman” experience (illustrated by the red-colored, faceless woman figure standing in the middle of the infographic). This delineation suggests two things. First, it reinforces and normalizes the development agencies’ practice of merging the Third World women into a single identity, “rather than by [recognizing] multiple identities which realistically frame their lives, choices, contexts, thoughts, and conditions” (Bannerji, Mojab, and Whitehead 2001, citing Mohanty 1984, Trinh 1989). Second, this homogenized, decontextualized presentation of the “Third World woman” figure makes it normal to offer a replicable, ahistorical model of interventions, dictate the positive result of documented land titling for the women and their children’s wellbeing across territories, cultures, histories, societies, and ethnicities. Here, that model of intervention is to empower women by giving them their family’s land titles. This prescription assumes land-as-property a normative relationship that predominates in all social and ethnic communities. This portrayal forecloses other possibilities of open access to forest land, rivers, or community/common land, upon which women and their community also heavily rely.

SECTION TWO: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF “WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS” IN SOUTHEASTERN GUJARAT

The preceding section has provided background on how the development regime produces knowledge about Third World women and homogenize their relations with land as ownership of private property. It also shows how development agencies legitimize their intervention roles in “empowering” women by constructing certain narratives and agendas. These narratives include images of oppressive local patriarchy and oppressed women, where cultural values are purported to keep women from legally owning land, and where international development agencies are the saviors. It also presumes sedentary farming on private land as the

predominant production form, and thus obscures diverse forms of land stewardship and types of production many communities depend on.

This section goes back to my fieldwork in the Narmada district of Gujarat in late 2018. By exploring the Vasava women's experiences with land in history and in the everyday, this section explores the problems of international development narratives on women's land rights for misrepresenting tribal women relations with land, and obscuring the voices, everyday experiences, and complex sentiments of tribal women after gaining land titles. Before getting to the Vasava, this section will show how development frameworks of women's land rights is translated to the tribal area, through the works of local NGOs. In my fieldwork, I got such insights by working with LWR.

Local NGOs' perspectives: the issue of *Pitrasatta* ("male power")

At a training center on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, I attended the annual paralegal worker training session organized by LWR. Paralegal workers were local women—from each *taluka* in Gujarat—appointed by LWR to give guidance and instruction to other village women on the legal process of putting women's names on family land records. After saying welcome to everyone, the LWR convener Kaveri scribbled on the board the term *pitrasatta* (the literal meaning in Gujarati is "male power," or "patriarchy"). She opened the training session by describing the problem of patriarchy in Indian society. Kaveri explained that in the current society, men had an upper hand on agricultural and household decisions, even though women were responsible for most agricultural work. *Pitrasatta*, she continued, referred to an imbalanced power dynamic, in which men were the subordinators and women were the subordinated. In this sphere, a patriarchal mindset (both in community and in local government) gave little

acknowledgement, respect, and valuation to women's agricultural labor, and coercively prevented women from owning land.

Kaveri is a freelance gender expert and development professional based in Ahmedabad. With her master's degree in social work with a focus on rural development from an urban public university, she worked in NGOs such as PRI to bring attention to gender equality and gender-sensitive dimensions in NGOs' programs. In 2013, she became the convener of LWR, where she took "strategic leadership" in rural women and land ownership "in a patriarchal rural set up" (as described on Kaveri's LinkedIn). Similar to Kaveri, all of the staff in LWR had received urban collegiate education and trained in the fields of social work and rural development. Their training background helps explain why LWR's narratives about women's land rights as mainly a rural patriarchy problem share many similarities with the international development agencies' visions.

After introducing the concept of *pitrasatta*, Kaveri set up an interactive activity to give evidence and illustrate the "male power" claim. She listed on the board different components of agricultural productions, such as land, seeds, tools, and money, and she asked the paralegal worker participants to talk about the different roles and statuses, in terms of access, control, and decision-making, between men and women in each aspect. The activity demonstrated that, although women did more agricultural work than men, their access/titling/decision-making power in all aspects of agricultural production was less than men. For example, in terms of agricultural land, the paralegal workers and Kaveri related how far fewer women had land titles than men. This lack of legal ownership, she suggested, prevented women from making their own decisions and getting access to governmental programs. Using this portrayal on the disjuncture between men and women's agricultural workload compared to their abilities to access and

control resources, Kaveri highlighted and reaffirmed that the tribal women's subordinated status was a result of the patriarchal mindset and structure.

As LWR staff finished reviewing that land rights was a problem owing to a local/state patriarchy, they transitioned to the next activity that instructed paralegal workers about techniques of collecting data that revealed this rural gender gap and signs of patriarchy. This activity shares similarities with the WID and GAD practitioners, who see patriarchy as the problem and thus prioritize the roles of gender-disaggregated data¹⁸ to understand the women's condition. Going back to the meeting, Kaveri explained that collecting gender-disaggregated data would help the paralegal workers know the overall status of local women with land titling, and where and which households to intervene.

Kaveri introduced a participatory tool called an "Asset Mapping Exercise," or village mapping. She explained this mapping exercise would be conducted in the *Mahila Gram Sabha* (or village women meeting), where women and members of the village would list their village members households, their marital status (e.g. widows, single women, married women), and the status of the women owning land in those households. The village mapping work created a local database that provided details on women's land ownership in the village. Besides village mapping, Kaveri also encouraged and instructed *taluka*-based paralegal workers (who work at legal advocacy centers) to get land records and titles data at the village Panchayat office, or

¹⁸ As GAD practitioners identified a patriarchal structure as a problem, they also emphasized the technique to see, search, identify, and even quantify women's subordinated and discriminated status compared to men. The need to see gender gap information spurred international development agencies to create and foreground sex-/gender-disaggregated metrics and data (World Bank 2016a). There are many similar terms to refer to this form of data that will appear within development sector discourse, such as gender-segregated data, gender-sensitive data, gender-/sex-specific data. Gender-disaggregated data can take many forms. They can take the form of statistical data to show the percentage gaps between men and women in a social unit (e.g. village, district, and nation-state) in terms of employment, education, asset ownership (e.g. documented land records). These can also take the form of measuring the attitude of local men or nation-state bureaucrats toward women, or the frequency of domestic violence.

iKisan status (registered farmer status, implying that they have names on land records) in an online database. Such data give paralegal workers as well as network staff information on the overall condition of women in the village and their land-ownership status. They also provide information on villages that need LWR's awareness campaigns, or training sessions in local village meetings and women's collectives, to raise local people's awareness of the benefits of women owning land. After learning about households whose female members have not yet had their names registered on land records, paralegal workers will go to such households to convince families or male members to put their daughters, wives, or widows' names on land records.

The activities occurring during a training day of LWR reflects how local NGOs play the role of not only adopting¹⁹ international development agencies' agendas, but also disseminating their narratives and approaches about women's land rights to the local tribal women and family. This framework includes the identification of local patriarchy is the main problem with regard to local women's land rights, and the mandate to gather gender-disaggregated data to understand this assumed cause and issue. Nevertheless, there are three limits in this approach. First, the "patriarchy" discussed in the narrative of Kaveri and LWR (as well as international development agencies) was introduced with little social and historical context. The way she talked about "patriarchy," just like how international development agencies do, implied it to be a pre-

¹⁹ To clarify, LWR does not blindly and rigidly apply what was said about the international development agencies' agenda about women's land rights. Rather, the network has tried to expand the scope of "land rights" to other forms of land use like forest access or communal farming. However, this attempt is still limited. Their contemporary project is mainly concerned with building paralegal centers and raising awareness of local government officials about women's process of getting family-owned land records. Although this focus is influenced partly by the fact that NGO staff was trained within a specific development epistemology (e.g. social work, rural development studies), their works also have to respond to their development or corporate philanthropist donors' demands and interests, which are mainly in land as private property, and the quantification of land records as sign of progress. This insight is drawn from my personal interview with Kaveri. She recognized that there were pressures and constraints from the donors that limited the activities of the network and influenced the indicators it created to assess their works.

constituted structure or quality that is inherent to a culture and society (i.e. tribal and “Indian” society). This understanding of patriarchy states it is a value or practice detached from and unrelated to the external influences such as the history of British colonialism or the prominent impact of male-biased postcolonial interventions by the international development agencies on the local social landscape. As documented in numerous tribal histories, including the Vasava, however, their societies tended to have more egalitarian gender relationships before the external disruptions (Parkinson 2002). The modern governance and economic agenda imposed during colonial and postcolonial times has tremendously altered this local gender relationship and negatively impacted tribal women’s status. Since patriarchy is not an essentialist, static local practice, overlooking the social and historical aspects of “local patriarchy” obscures the historical intrusions by Western powers that have created and perpetuated the conditions to (re)produce what is currently seen as *pitrasatta* in tribal communities.

Second, by reducing the causes that violate women’s land rights to local patriarchy, the local NGOs inadvertently take the intermediary role of extending international development agencies’ attempts to obscure the violence resulting from capitalist projects in the area. The impact of displacement due to dam construction, land grabbing that transformed tribal residential and agricultural land stewardship to serve industrial development purposes was no doubt destructive to tribal women and their communities. Despite these phenomena, the focus on “local patriarchy” allows narratives on women’s land rights to sidestep serious discussions about these forms of structural violence. The concealment allowed supranational developmental organizations to cultivate their moralized images at the same time as creating the conditions for the capital accumulation through the violation tribal land rights in the southeastern Gujarat.

Last but not least, by framing land rights as a local patriarchy issue, and thus confining the definition of “land rights” to the status of having documented land titles among family members, local NGOs convey the international development agencies’ generalization of private, registered property as a tribal normative relation with land. This conception of land in a private, legal sense obfuscates other common landforms that tribal communities also heavily rely on. This concealment purposefully underreported the severity of colonial and postcolonial practices of enclosing common lands (e.g. forests) and natural resources (e.g. forest products, river water) and converting them to sources of capital accumulation to serve either the colonial administration in the past or state government and international development funders in the present.

Rethinking the relations between Vasava women and the land

In order to illustrate the points I made above about the problems of conceptualizing women’s land rights based on essentialized local patriarchy premises, I will turn to exploring the experiences of Vasava women and their communities in history. Farmer (2010:295) critiques the problems of “desocialized understandings of social phenomena,” suggesting that uncontextualized understandings are reasons for continuous poor interventions in local areas. He uses the concept of “immodest claims of causality” to describe claims which are in reductionist in form, attributing causality to certain individuals or cultural differences without considering the role of history and political economy in places in which the problem is operating (295). Farmer’s concept helps explain why international development narratives on women and lands poorly speaks to the Vasava women’s experiences, as they neglect the women’s particular social, cultural, and historical contexts.

History, therefore, provides consequential contexts to gain more holistic insights into the Vasava women's complex, socially and historically embedded relationships with land. History also helps problematize seemingly normative concepts such as local patriarchy, private land ownership, and land as documented property. The following sections will use the Vasava/Bhil's history to (1) problematize local patriarchy as an essentialist tradition of the tribe and show the historical processes of (post)colonialism that disrupted egalitarian gender relationships in the Bhil tribe, thus reduced women's status in the tribe; (2) recontextualize that land-as-property was a Western conception imposed during colonial time rather than a tribal norm; and (3) foreground the violence of colonial history and contemporary capitalist development projects in southeastern Gujarat on the experiences of the Vasava women, given how those factors were important, yet not highlighted in the narratives of local NGOs and development agencies.

Before the colonial disruption: egalitarian gender relationship, fluid land notion, and extensive production forms

Before the British colonization in the early 19th century, the Vasava's production was subsistence-based and extensive. The group engaged in a variety of productive activities, including practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, grazing, fishing, hunting, and gathering forest produce (Whitehead 2007). In particular, the Vasava's agriculture was shifting cultivation that had some similar elements of settled agriculture such as the use of bullocks and ploughs. Their other forms of production included grazing animals, hunting, or gathering fruits and produces in the forests, and fishing from nearby streams and the Narmada River. Because of the diverse forms of production, land for Bhil households took both private and public forms.

Concerning the private form and the shifting of fields, landholdings were quite large and were inherited through patrilineal succession. It appears that "an average family of five

possessed about 10-12 acres of land, not including fallow land” (Whitehead 2010:44). This household ownership conception of agricultural land, however, was not the same as the capitalist notion. First, land was not static in one spot, as the family would move on and clear new fields where fallow land became open to others again. Second, ownership of land was based on oral rights of possession of land, rather than in registered or written form (Whitehead 2010). Third, the Vasava had complex system of shared family control over land and no individual had a monopolist power over it (Baviskar 1995). Concerning the public land, besides the agricultural land that were temporarily private, the Vasava also freely got access to the forests, rivers, and other common land forms to gather food and material resources (the Vasava’s reliance on common land still persists today).

While there are few documents on pre-colonial Bhil land stewardship, there is enough for us to infer that Bhil society was largely egalitarian compared to the present. As men and women played equally important roles in production, Vasava women did not face degradation in status as they do now. In Whitehead (2010)’s work *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*—in which she conducted an ethnography on the social life of Vasava communities before and after their displacement due to the construction of Savor Sardor Dam—, the Vasava women shared that they possessed greater freedom than women in the lowlands. For example, concerning customs on women’s comportment, they could divorce freely without stigma and they could dance, sing, drink, and smoke *bidis* with men on occasion. Unlike the lowland women, Vasava women were open about gender and sexuality. They did not face gendered taboos such as cooking during menstrual cycles. They also had more geographical mobility, such as they could travel from one village to another to visit their natal families or to sell produce in the market. In regard to labor, unlike the lowland women who were confined only to housework

and thus economically dependent on their husbands and fathers, the Vasava women could participate in agricultural labor with their men. Both Vasava men and women were responsible for childcare, and husbands usually took care of the house and children when their wives were working in the fields and shepherding livestock. Women, however, were still mainly responsible for most household tasks.

“Local patriarchy” as a colonization product

There were numerous colonial policies applied to the plain and hill areas of the Narmada Valley that irreversibly disrupted the subsistence-based production style and social organization of the Vasava. The colonial project also adversely transformed the Vasava’s relationship with land and production, and ultimately gender relations of the tribal community. Two of the most deleterious British policies were the bans on forest access and shifting cultivation, the two main ways of production practiced by the Vasava.

Although earlier having considered forests as “wasteland” (Deb 2009:109), the British started to see the importance of forests as a timber and teak supply to substitute for the depleted oak forests in England and Ireland (Baviskar 1995). The demand for timber increased due to the rise of ship-building for the royal navy in the Anglo-French wars during the early 19th century and merchant shipping for maritime trade, and railway construction (Baviskar 1995:70; Deb 2009:110). The rising value of timber and forests led the colonial government to “conserve” the forests. The administration saw the *adivasi*’s shifting cultivation and use of forest resources as threatening (like their prejudice against common property) and destructive to the forest:

For, almost without exception, colonial administrators viewed [shifting cultivation] with disfavor as a primitive and unremunerative form of agriculture in comparison with plough cultivation. Influenced both by the agricultural revolution in Europe and the

revenue-generating possibilities of intensive (as opposed to extensive) forms of cultivation, official hostility to [shifting cultivation] gained an added impetus with the commercialization of the forest. Like their counterparts in other parts of the globe, British foresters held [shifting cultivation] to be the most destructive of all practices for the forest, not the least because it competed with timber operations (Guha and Gadgil 1989:151-152)

As a result, the colonial administrators formed the Indian Forest Department in 1864 and passed the first Indian Forest Act in 1865, subsequently replaced by the 1878 Forest Act, to exert state monopoly over all forests, and to manage and keep the forest resources from being “exploited” by the *adivasis*. The Forest Department created new legal categories such as reserved and protected forests, in which some cultivation was allowed under supervision in the former, but none was permitted in the latter. The 1878 legislation (amended in 1890, 1894, 1904, and 1927) set up a new stage where common forests were enclosed and forests were turned into “government-defined property and the forest-products as commodities liable for revenue collection” (Whitehead 2010:56). It marked a new era of stricter state control over the local community’s forest activities, and restraint of the *adivasis*’s use of forest resources. Facing the prohibition of slash and burn agriculture, and the limited access to forest resources, along with the push to grow cash crop and monocrop, the Bhil had to gradually adopt intensive agriculture (Baviskar 1995:69).

As for forests, “conservation” was hardly about forests or environmental protection, but rather served as a ruse to generate colonial profit (Baviskar 1995:70, citing from Khandesh Gazetteer 1880:9). The new “scientific forestry” was mainly about raising monocultures of commercially valued timber species with a view to maximizing colonial revenue (Guha 1989:59-

61). In addition, the British invited “progressive” farmers such as the *patidar* who would cultivate cash crops such as cotton and opium that were beneficial for the colonizers (Baviskar 1995:71). They felled trees and turned forests into open fields, and leased them to the Patidar farmers for intensive agricultural production. The erasure of traditional production forms and the intrusion of lowland newcomers disrupted the Vasava’s ways of life, and led to serious unrest. Pinto (2002:216) recorded that “the major form of unrest in Rajpipla state appears to have been sparked by the loss of land from Vassawas to non-Adivasi farmers.”

Besides obstructing the main production practices of the Vasava, the British also offered compensation methods that did little to ameliorate their destruction, but rather deepened modernity’s violent effects on in the Bhil tribe and created conditions for what the current development feminists perceive as “local patriarchy.” The British resettled the tribes by giving them land plots that were now in a written record system with a titled proprietor. Before this system was emplaced, although tribal men had been predominantly responsible for protecting and defending the land, everyone in the household all had shared production and control over produce (Rao 2008). The British permanent settlement agenda was “a turning point in both property and gender relations” (Rao 2008:128-129). It turned a complex system of shared family control of land to a system where an individual, usually male, became the legal land proprietor. Thakur (2014:233) likewise notes that “the [Bhil] communities were granted alienable title to land made out in the name of men during the process of land settlements. This logic was derived from modern capitalist ideas where land is seen as a commodity, under private and determinate ownership²⁰. A system of fixed plots of land with identifiable proprietors also facilitated the

²⁰ See Ranajit Guha (1996)’s book *Rule of Property in Bengal* for more details about the contradictions between British progressive property discourse and the colonial state’s engagement with local tradition in India.

British's land revenue collection. Moreover, based upon the gender norms in 19th-century English society, the British planners preferred men as land proprietors, as they believed that women could not interact easily with the legal and administrative machinery (Rao 2008). The privilege of men and the conception of registered, private land plots began to transform the gender dynamic from egalitarian to one that prioritizes men in land- and agriculture-related decisions.

Not all Vasavas, however, were eligible for the land compensation program. Section 6 in the Indian Forest Act 1878 would only provide "suitable compensation" to a petitioner if their land is intruded (Whitehead 2010:57). There were further conditions that the British required before they could compensate a petitioner. Petitioners had to appeal their request in writing within three months after the area was pronounced under reserve. Furthermore, their appeal needed to be verified through written agreement with previous rulers (local kingdoms such as Rajpipla kingdom) that such customary rights were of long-standing existence and had been in continual use for the past twenty years (Whitehead 2010). These requirements were at odds with the fact the Bhil's land occupation per family was maintained in informal oral forms. As many Vasava did not hold written land records, they were excluded from both their land and the possibility of land compensation. This predicament occurs even after the Independence, as some tribal families do not have written land record to prove their long-standing occupation of the area and thus receive no recognition from the Indian government.

The Bhil and other *adivasis* who did not receive land compensation were pushed to become indentured laborers for the Patidars. Besides turning landless Bhils into agricultural laborers, the Patidars lent money to the Bhils to purchase their own private land in the settlement of debts. The British and Patidars thus felled more trees and turned forestland into fields that

were divided into taxable private property to sell to the Bhils (Baviskar 1995). Facing multiple external pressures and contexts—prohibition of slash and burn agriculture, the limited access to forest resources, the British coercion to grow cash crop and monocrop, along with the new private land system—the Bhil had to steadily adopt the intensive agriculture (Baviskar 1995:69). Gradually, a legal property system of land ownership (that preferred men as legal landholders) and intensive agriculture became dominant forms of land relations and production in the area.

The reliance on solely intensive agriculture created great economic difficulties for many households in less favorable seasons (such as dry season). As a result, many Vasava men migrated seasonally to nearby cities for work, while women were left at home to take care of households and fields, or took up jobs as agricultural workers on nearby farms (Whitehead 2007:85). This phenomenon altered household structures and also caused many changes in gender relations. The Indian historian Samita Sen (1992) explains how wage labor available to men made them receive higher status and respect than women; simultaneously, it devalued agricultural labor and household works. During the colonial period, even though rural women continued contributing to family's economy and production, such work was not as valued:

...women's varied activities [were] labelled supplementary. Consequently, women's work was perceived as marginal...The extent to which they contributed to household survival could remain unacknowledged. Women's work [i.e. collecting cow dung, weeding, cattle rearing, food preparation, etc.] was perhaps labelled as marginal and supplementary because such work was associated with poor returns, was casual and intermittent (Sen 1992:76)

As a result, women's status became less valued, and their say in decision making over domestic sphere, agriculture, and land receives less respect.

Furthermore, the Vasava's exposure to and increasing dependence on non-tribal society (i.e. Vasava men now work for the non-tribal people) compelled many tribal families to adopt Hindu caste hegemony.²¹ Taking on caste identities allowed some *adivasis* to avoid stereotypes associated with being tribal (Orans 1959). In addition, as many Vasava felt the need to mobilize and move into upward castes, they also practiced upper-caste values in a process Indian sociologist Mysore Srinivas (1952:30) calls "sanskritization." This process rigidified women's customs and erased the previous egalitarian gender relationship of the tribe. For example, Vasava women now had to adopt the upper-caste practice of *purdah*, or female seclusion by appearing less in public (Whitehead 2010). The mobilizing to upward castes also brought women's behavior under deeper scrutiny, as the way they carried themselves was considered a determinant of "social status in [a] fluid and uncertain social atmosphere" (Sen 1992:58).

In short, during the British colonial era, new systems—such as the male biased, registered land ownership system—and social changes—such as men's valued engagement in cash labor, and the process of "sanskritization" that governed women's behaviors—altogether played a big factor in depreciating the women and their roles in agricultural works. By showing different systems brought by the British administration that radically transformed the Vasava relationship to land, production, and gender, this historical lens problematizes local patriarchy and land-as-property as intrinsic and normative to this tribal community. It shows the involvement of Western structural forces in creating structural and material conditions that turned the Vasava's former egalitarian gender relationship into the new gender dynamic that privileged and

²¹ Vasava's adoption of Hindu values for advancing in a dominant Hindu society is never a passive or totalizing process. Instead, they combine with the local religion and practices, and create many syncretic beliefs and practices that share both lowland and upland values (Whitehead 2010). What I try to emphasize here is, the effect of adopting Hindu, or rather Brahminical, customs have some effects on controlling and restraining the dispositions and roles of the women in the household, in public, and also in production.

highlighted male power and importance. Such historical contour challenges the normative narratives of international development agencies and local NGOs for contributing to the idea of an essentialist local patriarchy that disrupts tribal women's land rights.

While supranational development organizations' discourse frames legal ownership of land as something related to freedom and empowerment, when looking back to the history of Vasava, this new land and settlement system was based upon British coercion that excluded the Vasava from their earlier production styles and restricted their access to common resources. The next subsection will explore how postcolonial state and internationally funded development projects in the southeastern Gujarat area extend this colonial legacy of privileging Vasava men, maintaining private land ownership and sedentary farming as purportedly "traditional" practices, and ultimately reducing women's status as well as violating their land ownership.

The postcolonial development's violence on tribal land rights

Postcolonial conceptions of economic growth in India builds on numerous British colonial legacies, one of which is the promotion of private property rights in land (Gupta 1998). Keeping the British logic of private gain, individual enterprise, and free market principles, the Indian state believed that "permanently fixing the revenue demand from land and eliminating intermediaries between the cultivator and the state would provide incentives to landowners to invest in agriculture" (Gupta 1998:44). As a result, documented land ownership continues to be embraced as postcolonial norm, while tribal access to common lands or resources are considered abnormal and destructive.

Before the 1980s, postcolonial development was an "inner-directed and national project" (McMichael 2012:43-46). Even though Western agents were the modelers and funders of development projects, it was the leaders of NICs who implemented these development visions

and turned them into national laws, policies, and initiatives. This development model was defined by economic nationalism, nation-state sovereignty, and governmentality. After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru turned down the Gandhian vision of an artisan and peasant country, and instead “built the Indian state with a vision of prosperous industry and many development projects” (Debal Deb 2009:117). Chaitanya Krishna (2003: 591) saw the application of development paradigm to newly independent India as “social conjuncture, the contours of which are defined by a basically feudal society on which has been superimposed the framework of a parliamentary democracy, a modern economy basically catering for the rich and powerful and a legal administrative ethos and culture which is a legacy of the colonial days and more or less a continuation and perpetuation of the same.” Since Nehru’s administration, two development projects initiated in southeastern Gujarat that directly affected the Vasava are: the construction of dams on the Narmada River and the application of Green Revolution’s technicalized agriculture that later expands to small landholding farmers.

As energy is an essential resource to build a modern, industrial, newly independent state, many infrastructure projects were begun in India to harness natural energy. The Indian state constructed large dams in order to harvest great source of hydropower energy from the Narmada River. In the area of southeastern Gujarat where the Vasava live, the state displaced the tribe from their original location for dam construction. One of the most notorious displacement incidents was due to the construction the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which was originally funded by the World Bank.²² Despite investors’ claims about the benefits of these dams—such as the ability to provide electricity to urban residents and industries and water to farmers—construction had great toll on the environment and the local inhabitants, including the Vasava. This dam’s

²² The World Bank later withdrew from the project because of the notoriety related to the resettlement program.

construction called for the eviction of the Vasava to different *talukas* such as Nivalda, which lacks access to rivers for fishing or nearby forests for collecting produce or grazing. The companies that funded the dam construction created a compensation policy to give new lands to the Vasava. However, this compensation policy, like previous colonial land policies, prefers their small plots of land grants to be registered under male names (Whitehead 2010). In Whitehead (2010:92)'s ethnography about the consequences of dam displacement, one young widow in the Narmada area "was especially distressed about the bias of the NWDT award, which stipulated that only male heads of households or later, major sons, were receive any land." Moreover, the land plots received are relatively small (2.5 acres) and have a variable, capricious quality of soil. In my personal conversation with a Vasava woman, she said that her father did not give land to her because the plots of land were too small, so land partition did not make sense.

There are two ways the nearby dam constructions contributed to the relationship between women and land ownership. First, these dam projects continued to alter the gender dynamics of Vasava villages, as development agencies and state preferred men to be landholders (in both state agenda and dams' compensation program). The differentiation between men and women in legal terms also gave men more power and voice over land-related decisions. In addition, for the many impoverished Vasava families where men had to migrate for work, men's wage-based labor made their work worth more than women's agricultural and home-making labor. This became especially true when cash became more necessary in the new cash economy system. Second, aside from changing gender dynamics of the Vasava village, the onset of industrial development projects are inseparable from the enclosure, intrusion, and privatization of common resources. Since these projects require massive amounts of space, they take away many resources that Vasava women have relied on for different productions. Development projects' violence on

tribal community and common land access, however, was rarely addressed in the international development agencies' agenda.

Besides dam construction, the endorsement of industrial agricultural practices has also restructured a new relationship between the Vasava, land, and gender dynamics. In December 1969, the U.S. Congress launched the Green Revolution as a major agenda in its foreign policy, which was believed to create "a promising foreign market to the pesticide, fertilizer, seed and tractor industries of the U.S." (Deb 2010:196). Soon the World Bank and the USAID launched the Green Revolution as an initiative to solve world poverty and hunger problems (Deb 2010:196).

Before the Green Revolution, agriculture was subsistence based for the Vasava. Land was a resource that could be enriched through free, naturally available resources such as cow dung as organic fertilizers, neem leaves and cow urine as herbicides, and rain-fed water as a main water resource. The making of these inputs were mostly done by women. Besides these resources, seeds could be reused after harvesting, tools were hand made, and extra labor on ploughing was from cows and bullocks. The Green Revolution principles that emphasize productivity and output yields have replaced traditional practices of agriculture for subsistence with commercial crops for sale on market for either urban consumption (rice and wheat), industrial consumption (cotton or sugarcane), or export (Gupta 1998). Farmers have to use and rely on the cash economy to purchase agricultural inputs, including hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, herbicides/pesticides, tractors, and water irrigation (Gupta 1998).

There are numerous ways commercialization and industrialization of agriculture privilege men and simultaneously diminish women's voices in agriculture. First, many of women's former jobs were replaced by new technologies, and subsequently, what agricultural work they can still

do is valued less (Mies and Shiva 1993, Escobar 1994). Moreover, the new commercialized agriculture relies on cash for agricultural investment. Local men are those who hold the cash (since they earn it in wage-paying sectors), which results in women having less of a say in how land is managed. In addition to the asymmetrical financial relationship, if a family wants to get agricultural support from the government, they need a land record. Since men are usually legal landholders as a result international development and state agenda, they also have the legal rights to deal with acquiring inputs (Agarwal 1994). Technicalization of agriculture that involves cash economy and the system of legal land records together forge a context where women's voice in agriculture is diminished by a variety of aforementioned factors.

The everyday²³ of land ownership empowerment

Returning to the paralegal training session I attended, we broke out for lunch at 2pm after a four-hour straight intensive training. I lingered in the training room with Kaveri and other staff to have some personal conversations about the works of LWR. Kaveri addressed and emphasized “empowerment” as one of the group's main approaches to women's land rights. She explained that for tribal women, the normalization of and obedience to patriarchy prevents them from recognizing their subordinate status. The work of “empowerment,” as part of LWR's mission, entails raising the women's awareness of the male power structure and their subordinate status, making them capable of overtly contesting and seeking out for help to break the patriarchal conditions. Citing Agarwal (1994)'s and other development reports' work, Kaveri talked about how legal land ownership would effectively empower women, and how LWR was working to spread awareness of legal land ownership for women. They believed that legally owning land allowed women to rely less on men and in-laws for decisions, to have a stronger voice in the

²³ I am using Veena Das (2006)'s concepts of the everyday and the ordinary.

household, and to gain more self-confidence to make decisions that fit their perspectives, such as investing in nutrition for her family and children's health. In addition, the acquired confidence from land titling made women comfortable to appear in the public sphere and participate in local village meeting to change law and its enactment.

Kaveri explained how the empowerment approach of LWR distinguished it from the traditional work of NGOs, which was target-oriented and aimed for deliverable end results. She criticized traditional NGOs' target-oriented approach for imposing an agenda on women that made them passive welfare recipients, and hence did not alter their mindsets to be aware, confident and capable of sustaining herself. Using the LWR's work as an example, Kaveri emphasized that a woman going through the empowerment process was able to be aware of patriarchy, actively want changes, and work for those changes. She said that empowerment did not plan "end" results, but was rather an ongoing process of transformation through personal efforts and outside support to gain choices and agency that were systematically denied.

Throughout this empowering process, the woman was believed to acquire knowledge to support herself and her children, and/or be able to participate in local politics to add her voice to change the male-biased policies. In short, Kaveri claimed that empowerment distinguished itself from other approaches by not imposing guidelines on the subjects' behaviors to produce ends, but rather to act upon women so that they could act in their own interests.

In my fieldwork, I found that the process of empowerment was not as simple as Kaveri suggested. While her group's activities did identify existing gender hierarchies and speak about some laws women could use to get land, none of her activities spoke to the everyday sociality of these women. Rather, her work focused on the idealized, individual process of empowerment. This was embodied in the expected results of empowerment, such as having a stronger voice in

land and agricultural decision making, or having more abilities to invest in family and children's nutrition and health. These assumptions of the empowering effects of having documented land titling also tied back to the international development agencies' tendency in using quantitative data (gathered from Third World women in different locations) to dictate and imagine the promising effects of empowerment (refer back to Figure 4).

When I spoke to a few Vasava women about their experiences of owning land, not all women went through a smooth or "empowering" transition. For women whose families were not supportive, they encountered new forms of strain between them and their kin after getting land titles. Such experiences revealed unanticipated consequences, as well as conflicting emotions of some women after gaining land records. These are parts of the everyday of empowerment that are not highlighted in international development agenda. These women's experiences demonstrate the negligence of development practitioners in attending to the nuanced, difficult realities of owning lands. The structure of empowerment, shown through Kaveri's rhetoric and the focus of her group's activities, is mainly concerned with teaching women about legal processes. Meanwhile, land titling empowerment fails to address the continuity of violence—whether by development projects or personal conflicts with families and kin—in the women's everyday life. Next, I share the stories of Lataben and Jagiben to challenge the predicted, optimistic effects of legal land ownership proposed by the international development agencies and local NGOs.

Stories of Lataben and Jagiben

Lataben is a Vasava widow living in a village in Besna. She had three children, all of them were less than 18 years old. Her main agricultural jobs were weeding, ploughing, crop cutting, and harvesting, and she also hired laborers to work for her. After Lataben's husband

passed away, Aarviben—a LWR paralegal worker and also Lataben’s neighbor—advised Lataben about getting land from her in-laws, and she agreed. Lataben gave Aarviben her legal documents, and Aarviben went to talk to her brother-in-law about consenting to transfer the land rights to her. At first, the brother-in-law was not “ready.” Then, Aarviben raised the brother’s awareness on land title, such as how Lataben would be able to access government schemes if she owned the land. After three meetings, the brother was convinced.

With Aarviben’s help, Lataben now owned 1.5 acres of land, located two kilometers from her residential house. I asked Lataben why she wanted to get the land at the time. She said that she had three children, so there were many expenses. She added that if the land was on her name, she could obtain benefits from the government agricultural programs. Her problem was that she was still sharing a house with her brother-in-law and father-in-law. Despite consenting to transfer the land to Lataben, after she received land records, the brother no longer talked to her, even though they lived in the same house. I asked Lataben if she felt comfortable to live in a shared space with the brother, and she said that she did not like the environment. Lataben did not elaborate on it because it seemed like she did not want to talk more about it. Her story suggested that even though Lataben had some benefits for owning the land herself, she had to accept the loss of relationship with the in-law, which also took away a potential source of social and material support for her children in the future. She also had to accept the continuous tension in her living space, because she still had to share that space with the brother-in-law.

Unlike Lataben whose domestic tension was only in a passive aggressive form, Jagiben faced serious violence and death threats from her in-laws. Jagiben is a Vasava widow, living in a village in Nivalda. When her husband passed away three years ago, she inherited his eight acres of land and put her name on his land record to prove her legal status. However, her sisters-in-law

were not happy about this and wanted to get their own share of land from Jagiben's land. Jagiben did not agree to this, but the sisters-in-law and their sons still encroached upon her land and grow their crops on her field. They used death threats and physical violence to pressure her to allow them to cultivate on the same field. When I asked why she did not reach out to police and state agents to intervene, Jagiben said that since she lived in the same village with the sisters, she did not want to have conflict with them. She was also not comfortable with taking any legal action against the sisters because they also threatened that they would kill her only son.

Unlike Kaveri's generalized, optimistic narrative about empowerment, or the supranational development organizations' strong claims on the benefits of gaining land titling, Lataben's and Jagiben's stories present a more nuanced picture than what these development agents suggest. Before analyzing in-depth the lived realities of gaining land titles to some of the Vasava women, I want to emphasize I do not see any of my informants as passive, nor absolute victims of ongoing violence (in either tangible or intangible form) within their family/kin relationships. Rather, I acknowledge and respect their multiple forms of agency, whether it is their decision to cut family ties to lead their own lives, or to continue yielding in or allowing their families to encroach on the lands. What I try to emphasize in this section, however, is the nuanced realities that the women have to continue facing and how they internalize their personal challenges. For Lataben, it was her own responsibility to accept a severance from the in-law family, a social and material support for her children, to take the land titling. For Jagiben, she had to deal with ongoing violent conflict with the in-laws about the land she legally owned. In contrast to the smooth narratives suggested by the infographics or in NGOs' narratives, gaining land titling is a rough process and continued to pose new everyday challenges to the women

whose families are not supportive. However, none of these granular challenges are raised in the discourse of empowerment of women's land rights.

I asked the NGO staff person who was present when we talked to Lataben if they could do anything to deal with women's domestic troubles after the land titling process, and he said no. The NGOs do not give her a means to deal with this violence because all they do is give legal advice and emphasize self-confidence. When I talked to Kaveri about how the LWR network helped women with conflicts after getting land titles, she said that tribal women could contact local police to intervene. However, for Jagiben, she did not want this because her village was small, and she did not want her domestic conflict to spill out and become public gossip. As a result, public challenges in obtaining land rights become private challenges afterwards, as many women have to continue dealing with the ongoing, or sometimes escalated tension with their family/kin. International development agencies' strong claim in the positive correlation between private land ownership and women's empowerment provides little space to consider the women's sentiments, dilemmas, reactions, and other complex personal experiences related to the lived realities of owning land records.

I admit that despite my conversations with nine Vasava women, I did not collect sufficient data to explore very deeply the "voices" of these women. As a student who was only in the area for one month, I faced multiple struggles doing fieldwork: time limits, transportation, translator availability and reliability, language barriers, only meeting women the NGOs introduced me to, and pressure from the network on what questions to ask.²⁴ For each woman, I could only speak with them once and delving into more in depth personal stories seemed inappropriate for a newcomer like me. In order to ensure I did not make my informants feel

²⁴ For more information on difficulties I faced in conducting my fieldwork, see the "Methodology" section.

uncomfortable, I kept our conversations at a more surface level. Even though we did not speak about the specific details of their personal challenges, this limited data still made me realize that for some women whose families are not supportive, gaining title to land is not smooth a process for them.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has elaborated how international development agencies' framework on women's land rights poorly addresses the Vasava women's everyday relationship with land. It suggests that women's land ownership with regard to development epistemology has been concerned with development interests more than the women's interests. There are two main advantages in how development agents reduce obstacles to "women's land rights" to local/state patriarchy and local women's lacking awareness. On one hand, this delineation enables development organizations to legitimize their roles to intervene, prescribe solutions, and purportedly empower Third World women. Through these interventions, development agencies burnish their moral image, distance themselves from responsibility for the marginalization of local populations, and identify themselves as taking on the responsibility to fix the Third World's "problems" (which are aligned with the regime of Western knowledge and power). On the other hand, the imposition of a restricted definition of land rights allows development organizations to continue the Western, colonial norm of viewing land as private property, and reject the numerous common, unregistered forms of land stewardship that women in many communities also heavily rely on. Moreover, by invalidating the roles of common lands and resources in Third World women's lives, development agents obscure their own violent roles in extracting resources from tribal lands, and thus preventing indigenous women's access to these landforms for production.

The socially and historically embedded experiences of the Vasava women repudiate the development agents' "immodest claim of causality" (Farmer 2010:295) between land titling and women's empowerment. This claim is immodest because possessing land documents does not alter the material and structural conditions—imposed by past British colonizers and onto current developmental projects—that impoverish the Vasava community and simultaneously diminish the tribal women's status. Instead, this narrative put the burden of improving marginalized conditions on the women's shoulders, rather than radically challenging and contesting the self-reproducing violence of Western development projects. Besides seeing how larger structural violence is enfolded in the women's difficult relationship with land, an insight into the Vasava women's everyday experiences reveals unanticipated consequences after gaining land titles. In contrast to the strong causal relationship between private land title and women's empowerment in development agenda, for some Vasava women, gaining title to land is not a smooth process. Some of my informants continue went through complex emotions, quandaries, doubts, and even violence after having land titles. Despite the limited ethnographic details that emerged from my field research, by attending to the Vasava women's voices, this thesis reveals that Vasava women are social beings who are enmeshed in relations and embedded in and attached to their tribal kin life. Their affective and socially embedded lives challenge the international development agencies' technocratic practices that treat women as pre-constituted, homogenized subjects, who can be fixed through the analysis of statistical data and application of replicable intervention models. Neglecting women's particular conditions and voices, development agencies have produced a women's land rights agenda that overstates the benefits of land titling for women and, in doing so, poorly speaks to the women's complex and varied experiences. This practice is what the thesis calls *immodest empowerment*.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Map of Narmada area (Maps of India 2011)

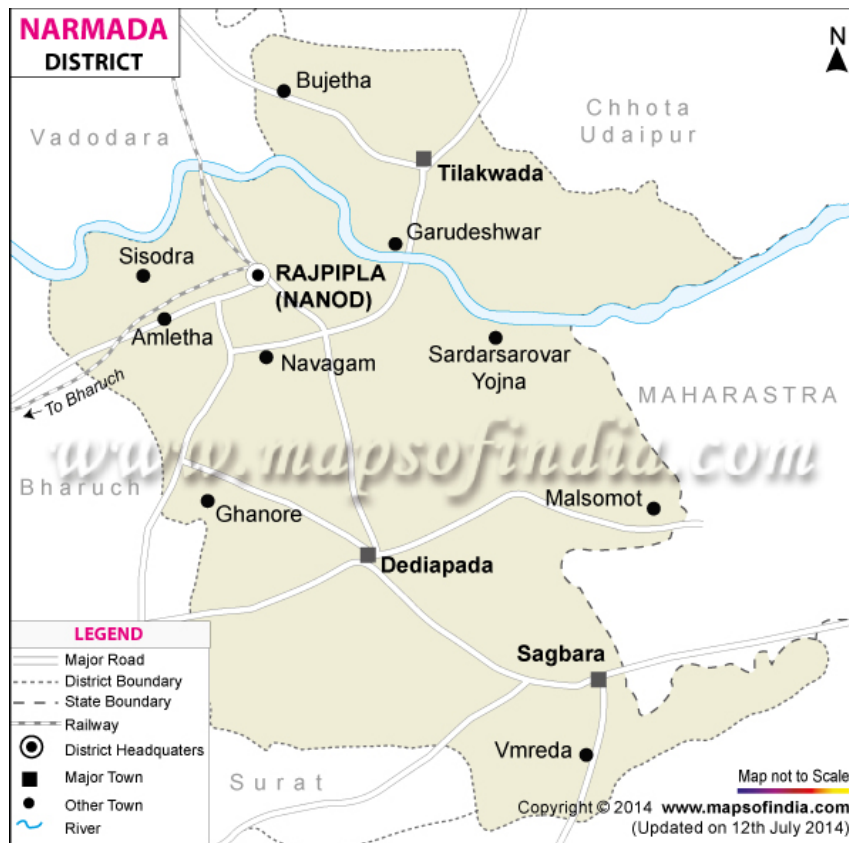


Figure 2: Landesa (2016)'s infographic "The Law of the Land and the Case for Women's Land Rights"



Figure 3: Landesa (2018)’s report “Girls and Land: A Briefer on Landesa’s *Girls Project* in West Bengal, India”



GIRLS AND LAND

www.landesa.org

... But barriers begin early in life

Obstacles between women and these land-related benefits often begin early in life. As such, it is important to reach them as girls.

In India, girls and women are responsible for much of the labor on land, and the law allows women to access, own, and inherit land. But in practice, a number of factors often deny women these rights. Even before they are women, girls are not well-positioned to realize their land rights. In India, early-life obstacles include:

- **Lack of knowledge:** Generally, girls in India are unaware of what their land rights are, the institutions and processes that are key to realizing them, and the elements and benefits of having land rights.
- **Common practices and biases:** Common practices and biases make girls unlikely candidates for inheriting land. Such assets are usually marked for male heirs, as parents wish to retain property within the family, and a girl is expected to move away to her husband’s home after marriage. Families also pay dowry when their daughters are married, the cost of which is a significant burden for poor families. It is usually understood that when a girl takes dowry to her husband’s home, she does not deserve further family resources or assets such as land, even though she has a legal right to inherit family land, and the dowry is rarely an asset for her own possession or use.

LANDESA’S INNOVATIONS WITH GIRLS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Landesa’s *Girls Project* seizes upon an opportunity to help adolescent girls to build knowledge and establish



Girls Project participants Sushmita, 14, and friend

improve nutritional and educational outcomes. With Landesa’s support, the program has incorporated issues of land and inheritance rights, asset-creation, and land-based livelihood skills.

- **Knowledge, mindset, and empowerment:** The project is designed to address knowledge of girls’ and women’s land rights; mindsets around land rights (i.e., even if parents know that the law supports it, do they believe a daughter should inherit land?); and a sense of empowerment (i.e., does a girl feel able to exercise her inheritance rights, and do parents feel able to make decisions about inheritance, dowry, marriage, and other issues that contradict community norms?).
- **Multi-stakeholder approach:** The project engages not only girls, but other stakeholders who affect their lives. The government-sponsored girls’ empowerment program runs primarily through village-level “girls’ groups,” through which community workers conduct a series of “learning games” with the girls. While the program is

Figure 4: Landesa's (2015) infographic "A Better World: Strengthening Women's Land Rights"

