

# Women and Their Interests in Rural India

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ijg](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ijg)**Narendar Pani<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

There is a substantial and growing recognition of the hazards of treating the interests of women as being homogenous. A variety of sources focus on diversity in the interests of a woman, ranging from bargaining with patriarchy where she is forced to carry out diverse tasks within the household, to the extension of these negotiations elsewhere in her socio-economic reality. These challenges are accentuated at times of wider social transformation. Responses of women to these challenges are also influenced by their position within the household. This article seeks to gain insights into the complex negotiations between women, households and society in times of socio-economic transformation by exploring the relationship between women's interests, strategic gender interests and practical gender interests within households that are headed by women. It does so through an empirical examination of the linkages between these interests of women across four different patterns of transformation in 21st-century rural India.

**Keywords**

Women's interests, gender interests, transformation, household, patriarchy, rural India

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The process of negotiating gender within the household has been seen through a variety of perspectives. Among economists there has been considerable movement away from the formulation associated most commonly with Becker (Becker, 1965) of a unitary household trying to maximise its utility. The difficulties that emerge in this approach have been explored in considerable detail by both economists and anthropologists (Folbre, 1986; Guyer, 1997), contributing to a widespread rejection of the idea of the household being a homogenous entity (Kabeer, 1998). In its place have emerged a number of approaches ranging from the neo-classical institutionalist approach to the feminist (Braunstein, 2007). It has been pointed out that most of these approaches involve some form of bargaining (Agarwal, 1997) and has been analysed in terms of conditions within the household well as influences from factors outside it (Agarwal, 1994; Rao, 2006; Quisumbing, 2003). Many of these studies provide empirical insights into the nature of intrahousehold bargaining in India. Some relate to intrahousehold bargaining by specific groups of women, such as domestic workers during the COVID pandemic (Mohan et al., 2020). Others focus on more widespread phenomena, such as son preference (Alakshendra & Li, 2021).

While these diverse approaches seek to capture the processes through which women bargain within the household, they also reflect a wider process of bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988, 1998). In examining these complex negotiations, it is important to avoid a second homogenisation, that of women's interests. The individuality of women and the varied conditions they face militates against treating women's interests as being uniform. This has been recognised in the distinction that is made between women's interests and gender interests, and further between strategic and practical gender interests (Molyneux, 1984). Whereas women's interests are the interests a woman develops, gender interests are the concerns she shares with other women, and practical interests reflect her response to immediate needs. Transformations that have taken place in rural India in the twenty-first century have caused women to experience very different processes of change both within and outside their households. At the epicentre of this complex relationship between gender, the household and socio-economic transformation is a woman who is seen, by others in the household, to head the household. This follows the Census of India definition of the head of a household as 'a person who is recognised as such by the household' (India, 2011). Her position within the household means that she needs to look not just at gender interests but also the interests of her household in the midst of a

transformation. This article seeks to explore this complex set of relationships by focusing on the reality faced by women who head households in the midst of transformations in rural India.

## **A Gendered Approach to Transformations**

A primary concern when exploring gender negotiations within the household is conceptualisation of the household. A wider recognition of the differences within households has led to a greater focus on the negotiations between individuals within them (Hart, 1995, 1997), contributing to their being seen as little more than sites for intra-familial negotiations (McElroy, 1992). And yet, in many societies, the family plays a critical role in the everyday functioning of individuals. The household typically reflects where the family is situated economically, and its location in the geography of the village can reflect its social status. Negotiations around gender within the household are not immune to the conditions that the household faces. A woman who breaks patriarchal shackles within her household to seek paid work outside, would still be severely constrained, if she belongs to a group that cannot access jobs.

Within a household, there are those who fall in line with the place of the family in society as well as rebels who resist. Diversity of interests weighs against treating the women who head households as being representative of all women. But the woman who heads a household has a prominent place in influencing relationships within it. She may find it necessary to act in ways that are influenced not just by her gender, but also by the need to protect the interests of the household as a whole.

At the core of a woman's response to the responsibility of heading the household would be a perception of her interests. In exploring this perception, Molyneux's distinction between women's interests, strategic gender interests and practical gender interests is useful:

Since women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means—among them class, ethnicity and gender—the interests they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible to generalise about the interests of women. Instead we need to specify how the various categories of women might be affected differently, and act differently on account of the particularities of their social positioning and of their chosen identities. However, this is not to deny that women generally have certain interests in common. This can be called 'gender interests'. (Molyneux, 1984, p. 62)

Apart from women's interests there are also gender interests—the shared concerns of women. Strategic gender interests are formed in pursuit of strategic goals 'such as women's emancipation and gender equality'. Practical gender interests are formulated by women who find themselves in particular positions in the division of labour, usually in response to an immediate need. Such interests need not be committed to removing gender difference that is essential to those pursuing strategic gender interests.

These distinct sets of interests are evident in the Indian woman's experience of rural transformation. Rural transformation has been viewed in India through a variety of lenses, most focussing on processes of production. A number have looked at the transformation that emerges from the spread of irrigation (Epstein, 1962; Epstein et al., 1988). Others have focused on the changes brought about by the Green Revolution (Shiva, 2016; Singh, 2000). Yet others have sought to identify modes of production that would reflect a larger system (Patnaik, 1990) while others have focused on social transformations, especially caste (Jodhka, 2002). When seen from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of this rural transformation calls for a focus on a major concern of a large number—the pressure to move out of agriculture. In a larger study, it has been argued (Pani, 2022) that there are four types of transformation taking place in rural India: three in response to the pressure to move out of agriculture and one where modern agriculture offers employment to those being forced out of agriculture elsewhere. Each of these transformations generates its own form of migration. The first form emerges from a pattern of rural transformation spurred by the dispersed growth of non-agricultural activities. This local non-farm led transformation allows individual workers to work in dispersed urban centres while continuing to reside in their villages. The second form of transformation is in regions in which large numbers of workers cannot get work for six months in a year, and hence meet the Census of India definition of marginal workers. Their limited migration capital, especially in the context of the high cost of living in the city, leads them to seek work in the city even as they maintain their households in the village. These workers take up short-term assignments in cities to support, and sometimes enhance, the economic conditions of their rural households. Since these opportunities often arise at great distances, this involves some members of the household—usually male—tapping work opportunities in distant cities while the rest of the family stays in the village. This form can be referred to as the marginal worker transformation. A third transformation matches the expectations of development economists. When workers have the migration capital to move out of their villages permanently, it leads to a movement not just out of agriculture but also fundamentally altering the relationship with the village. This movement out of rural areas

can be referred to as leaving the process of rural transformation. In the midst of an overall situation of pressure on agriculture, there are also pockets where a more modern system of agriculture has been put in place, overcoming the problem of scale and attracting labour from other rural areas. This leads to a fourth process of change: entering the process of agricultural transformation.

Each of these four transformations in rural India are likely to affect women and their interests in diverse ways, the common prompt for all being the pressure on agriculture. The first set of women's interests would relate to their ability and willingness to move out of this economic activity. This would be reflected in whether women heads of households cultivate the land owned by the household, and if so, the proportion of such women being an indicator of this set of women's interests. Other sets of women's interests would be reflected in the type of non-agricultural occupation they are able to find, their ability to borrow their way out of difficult economic situations, and the overall material conditions they have to live with.

Strategic gender interests that prompt the pursuit of emancipation and gender equality, would depend on the differences that actually exist. Specific conditions in each transformation may reinforce gender disparities that already exist, or may serve to reduce them. The differences that remain would give us a sense of the scope for the pursuit of strategic gender interests. The pursuit of gender interests would also be influenced by other negotiations of women with patriarchy. It is quite conceivable that these negotiations would, in some cases, even lead their practical gender interests to go against strategic gender interests. These practical considerations could even contribute to households headed by women continuing to have a gender bias, manifested in terms of access to the workplace or to education. An indicator of discrimination in access to education is the difference between the proportion of working-age men and women in the household who engage in paid work. This would include work in household industry for which a wage might not be paid to members of the family but would be paid for if others are employed. This indicator would obviously only be relevant where there are both men and women in the family, the indicator of discrimination in access to education being the difference in the average years of education of men and of women in the family. In both cases, in a particular form of rural transformation, we can take the percentage of households with both men and women, and if the difference favours men, it as an indicator of intra-household gender discrimination.

The task of capturing women's interests, strategic gender interests, and practical gender interests of women who head households in different transformations brings up a methodological choice. Circumstances faced

by women heads of households in Indian villages are complex and can be understood through ethnographic studies that look at the various dimensions of these women's lives. And yet there are senses in which the picture would not be complete. The differences across some forms of transformation are typically not available in a single village. Each transformation that can, and does, exist in different parts of a large and diverse country, is best captured by a scientifically determined sample. While such a survey cannot be expected to capture the details of an ethnographic study, it does provide an effective comparison between the circumstances faced by women who head households in each of the four processes of transformation.

One such survey was conducted by the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, in 2017. The sample was designed to cover four sets of 800 households, each chosen from a collection of villages that best reflected a particular form of rural transformation. The villages for the Leaving Rural transformation, for instance, were chosen from districts, and then *taluks* (sub-districts), where this trend was most evident. The sample of 3200 country-wide households spread across 28 villages in eight states, with responses based on informed consent from 3,077 households, provided information on 13,897 persons. This survey also had data on the women-headed households analysed in this article.

Data analysis indicated that the circumstances of these women differed quite substantially across forms of rural transformation. Based on an Index of Distance from Absolute Deprivation (hereafter IDFAD) developed in a larger study (Pani, 2022), it is evident that the levels of development associated with the different forms of transformation vary a great deal. Local Non-farm transformation, with the ability of its elite to make a generational transformation, is clearly the best off with the highest IDFAD of 31.3. The Entering Agriculture transformation, with its combination of corporatised agriculture and extremely vulnerable small farmers is a distant second with an Index of Distance from Absolute Deprivation of 15.7. The Leaving Rural transformation where the more privileged have access to the migration capital needed to leave permanently resulted in an Index of Distance from Absolute Deprivation of 15.1. The Marginal Worker transformation is clearly the worst off, with an Index of Distance from Absolute Deprivation of 9.4. Differences extended beyond material deprivation to the nature of the family and the household and the Index of Distance from Absolute Deprivation contributed to a larger index of dominance by groups in the realms of the economy, polity and access to education. Dominance by the dominant identity group was highest in the Entering Agriculture transformation,

with the setting up of large modern farms. The Local Non-farm transformation that saw changes among the traditional elite came next. With the elite of the Leaving Rural transformation abandoning the village, the level of dominance of this group was lower. Widespread poverty reduced the dominance of the dominant identity group in the Marginal Worker transformation, to a point where short-term migrants to the city could use their higher nominal urban wages to come back and challenge the older elite in the village.

Variation in the changes brought about by different transformations extended to the realm of gender as well. The proportion of women-headed households ranged from as high as 40.9 percentage in the Leaving Rural transformation to a low of 6.8 percentage in the Entering Agriculture transformation. The proportions in the other two transformations were also not negligible, at 10.6 percentage in the Local Non-farm transformation and 13 percentage in the Marginal Worker transformation. These substantial differences in the presence of households headed by women reinforce the case for studying each transformation separately before drawing more general lessons from the varied experiences of women's interests and gender interests.

While the article focuses on quantitative data from the primary survey to make its argument, these assessments were confirmed through a series of qualitative surveys by a number of researchers, ranging from interviews to confirm unusual patterns to ethnographic studies of specific villages. One such example is from interviews carried out by this author. As we shall see in the next section women-headed households tended to discriminate less against women in their household participating in the workforce. While they were not always willing to articulate such a difference, it was apparent in their actions. In one instance, the land available to one such household was used to grow groundnuts. All the women of the household as well as other women relatives and women friends were mobilised to harvest it. The only male in the entire process was the young son of the household who had missed school so as to communicate with the men who provided water to flood the land so that the groundnut plants could be uprooted.

### *Leaving Rural Transformation*

As the largest proportion of women-headed households were in the groups Leaving Rural transformation, it is an obvious starting point of our analysis. At the core of the transformation are the uncertainties of migration, whether in the realm of non-agricultural employment

opportunities or the changing living and other conditions in unknown large cities. The response to this uncertainty often takes the form of one member of the family—usually male—first exploring the city, and then taking the rest of the family, after he has found a place for them in the town or city. In a study of garment workers in Bengaluru (Pani & Singh, 2012), male workers first moved to the city, and after they established an economic base, they brought their wives to take care of the house—even if the women also had full-time jobs. It was only after the household reached some level of stability that the children were brought from their grandparents' home in the village.

In general, there is no guarantee that this process will be the same for all families. A man may venture into the city and find enough work to sustain himself, and yet not have enough for his wife and children. As this results in the latter remaining in the village for extended periods, the wife takes on the responsibility of the rural household. After a while, she is seen as the head of that household. This contributes to the high proportion of households that were headed by women in the villages Leaving Rural transformation.

The interests of women who headed households were deeply influenced by the process of the transformation out of agriculture. Small holdings characterised as much as 58.1 percentage of the households headed by women, owning two acres or less, and 38.4 percentage were landless. Even those who owned some land found it difficult to retain a foothold in agriculture. Only 9.8 percentage of the women who headed landowning households stated cultivation to be their main activity, the lowest in any form of the transformations.

However, it is not as if they had many other earning opportunities and just 6.8 percentage of the women who headed households found work as agricultural labour, and 14.2 percentage of them as non-agricultural wage labour. Limited livelihood opportunities contributed to more than half the women who headed households stating domestic duties to be their main activity. Taken together with those who said they were not working or were carrying out work in household industries for which they were not paid, as many 65.5 percentage of women who headed households did not earn from their main activity. This was reflected in the economic condition of their households. Nearly a third of the women who headed households—30.3 percentage—lived under thatched or other less permanent roofs, and as many as 84.2 percentage practiced open defecation.

Within the general level of deprivation there were substantial differences in their ability to borrow their way out of economic difficulty. A total of 61 percentage of the women who headed households did not borrow.



And among those that did borrow, 19 percentage sourced their primary loans from family, relatives, neighbours and other friends. At the same time there were other women heads of households who had access to more formal sources of credit. Among those that did borrow, 42.1 percentage were able to access state institutions, whether they were through Self-Help Groups, direct loans from banks, Kisan Credit Cards, or the Post Office. And another 17.3 percentage of those who did borrow did so from Non-Banking Finance Companies.

The existence of some diversity in woman's interests did not preclude the existence of some larger distinct gender differences that determined the scope for strategic gender interests. In contrast to the 9.8 percentage of the women who headed landowning households seeing themselves as cultivators, 43.1 percentage of similarly placed men declared themselves to be cultivators. The differences in the ability to cope with a declining agriculture scenario were muted in some domains by the equalizing power of deprivation. The widespread reliance on open defecation in this transformation affected both men and women. Thus, even as the women who headed households had a higher proportion practicing open defecation, it was only 5.2 percentage points higher than the proportion for the men who headed households. However, lack of sanitation affects women and girls in ways that are very different to their male counterparts

The gender difference increased when conditions allowed for greater variation. Even as a little less than a third of the households headed by women lived under thatched and other less expensive roofs, the proportion of their male counterparts living in similar houses was 9.5 percentage points lower. A similar pattern existed in access to loans, with the proportion of women who headed households not having a loan being 13 percentage points higher than that of their male counterparts. This difference was even greater, at 15.6 percentage points, in the realm of landless households, and more so in the workplace. A third of the men who headed households were cultivators, an entire 27.6 percentage points greater than their women counterparts.

Even as marginally more than a quarter of the men who headed households had loans from official sources, less than a sixth of similarly placed women had any. Fortunately, this difference was not transferred to support in terms of ration cards. The generally poorer economic conditions of households headed by women did increase their eligibility for Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards, and the proportion of households headed by women that held these ration cards was 5.7 percentage points more than the households headed by men.

The difficult conditions of this transformation left their mark on the practical gender interests of women who headed households. Their practical interests lay not just in improving their personal shares within the

household but in increasing household income as well. In a transformation marked by a noticeable gender bias, the women were not entirely averse to practicing it themselves so as to save household income. As many as 59.8 percentage of the households headed by women discriminated against women in education, and 51.1 percentage of them did so in terms of workforce participation. These levels of discrimination were lower than the levels of discrimination practiced in households headed by men. As many as 68.9 percentage of the households headed by men revealed discrimination against women in education and an even higher 75.2 percentage in workforce participation. Yet the proportion of women-headed households that discriminated against women was by no means negligible, emphasizing the difference between the pursuit of strategic gender interests and practical gender interests.

### *Marginal Worker Transformation*

The striking feature of the Marginal Worker transformation was the severity of economic deprivation. The diminishing viability of farming ensured that barely 23.5 percentage of the heads of landowning households—both men and women—declared themselves as cultivators, the lowest across the four forms of rural transformation. The severely limited non-farm opportunities in the vicinity of the village contributed to a large number of workers not being able to get work for even six months in a year. As extreme poverty severely limited available migration capital, workers were forced to seek short-term assignments in cities in order to maintain their households in the village. The short-term nature of urban assignments added to the identification of men with their household in the village. Despite long periods of absence, they were considered the heads of the household. When men did not come back 13 percentage of the households in this form of transformation were regarded as headed by women.

The pressure to leave agriculture in this transformation had a marked influence on women's interests. Two-thirds of the households headed by women were landless and the 33.3 percentage who owned land had less than two acres. Only 10.5 percentage of the women who headed landowning households were able to cultivate them, ensuring that only 4.6 percentage of the women who headed households were cultivators. The decline in agriculture ensured they did not have many opportunities to work as agricultural labour either, with just 10.3 percentage of these women declaring it as their primary occupation. The option of getting work as non-agricultural wage labour was also extremely limited with

only another 10.3 percentage declaring it as their primary occupation. Severe constraints on women who headed households finding work outside the home resulted in as many as 46 percentage of them declaring domestic work as their primary activity.

Four-fifths of these women did not have any loans and of the fifth who did borrow, there was considerable dependence on family, relatives, neighbours and other friends as the source of 55.6 percentage of their primary loans. Deprivation meant that only 12.6 percentage of the women who headed households lived under a reinforced cement concrete (RCC) roof, and virtually all these women—96.6 percentage—practiced open defecation. This situation was not helped by the state largely looking the other way. In addition to loans from official sources being limited, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) was virtually non-existent in this transformation.

Within this overall picture of deprivation, women's interests were not homogenous: among women-headed households, 22.2 percentage were able to tap official sources for their primary loans. The inequality was more pronounced in the access to ration cards, with 49.4 percentage of the households headed by women having BPL ration cards while 18.4 percentage had no card.

The gender difference that determines the scope for the pursuit of strategic gender interests was evident in this process of transformation. Nearly a quarter of the men who headed landowning households—24.6 percentage—were able to cultivate that land, more than twice the level of similarly placed women. This ensured that 16.2 percentage of these men claimed to be cultivators, nearly four times more than women who headed households. The difference was even sharper in the access to wage labour outside agriculture. While 54.1 percentage men said that wage labour was their primary economic activity, this proportion was far lower, at 10.3 percentage, for women who headed households.

The overall levels of deprivation reduced scope for gender difference. Men householders without loans were just 3.9 percentage points less than that of women-headed households and those without ration cards was 2 percentage greater than households headed by women. Though there were no explicit restrictions in the access to toilets, the proportion of men who headed households and practiced open defecation was 7 percentage points lower than in the case of similarly placed women.

Deprivation affected the practical gender interests of women-headed households. Short-term migration to distant cities was typically through groups consisting entirely of young men whose earnings contributed to the overall economic condition of their village households. Women, for

reasons ranging from personal security to other forms of discrimination, rarely migrated alone. One factor that improved the chances of a young man gaining access to urban work was some school education. Practical gender interests of women-headed households thus demanded a transfer of a large proportion of limited household resources to educating prospective male wage earners. As a result, as many as 71.1 percentage of the households headed by women recorded a gender bias in education in favour of the male as against the 58.2 percentage in the households headed by men. It is significant that women-headed households were much more invested in women joining the workforce, and only 44.7 percentage of such households discriminated against women in workforce participation as against 73.4 percentage in the households headed by men. These figures reflect the differential impact of deprivation in the pursuit of practical gender interests.

### *Local Non-farm Transformation*

If the Marginal Worker transformation was at the lower extreme of the scale of economic conditions in the four transformations, the Local Non-farm transformation was at the opposite end of the economic spectrum. A higher proportion of households in this form of rural transformation lived under RCC roofs—43.3 percentage—than their counterparts in the three other transformations. Much of this relatively less strained economic condition can be attributed to the low levels of disruption in the Local Non-farm transformation. The availability of non-agricultural work in the vicinity of the village allowed the younger generation to seek non-farm jobs while the older generation continued in agriculture. This generational shift in the role of agriculture contributed to a situation where 74.2 percentage of the heads of households were cultivators while the proportion for all workers in this transformation was much lower at 56.3 percentage. As 75.8 percentage of the older generation heads of landowning households declared cultivation as their main activity, out-migration was limited. Thus, only 10.6 percentage of the households in this form of transformation were headed by women.

Women's interests in this transformation were greatly influenced by the fact that the relatively smooth process of intergenerational movement out of agriculture did not quite extend to those women who headed households. In an overall milieu where heads of households continued in agriculture, only 38.3 percentage of the women who headed landowning households saw themselves as cultivators. With 36.5 percentage of the households headed by women being landless, the overall proportion of cultivators among this section of women was 24.3 percentage.

Moving down the economic hierarchy within agriculture was not much of an option either. Only 6.8 percentage of the women who headed households found work as agricultural labour.

Opportunities for women outside agriculture was also quite constrained, leading to 18.9 percentage of those who headed households relying on whatever work was available under the MGNREGS. The lack of earning work opportunities meant that 33.8 percentage of these women gave domestic work, work in household industries without payment, and simply 'not working' when asked about their primary economic activity. A substantial number of women who headed households sought to borrow their way out of economic stress. While 44.6 percentage of women-headed households did not have any loans, the share of women-headed households without loans *was the lowest among the four transformations*. According to official sources 41.5 percentage of the primary loans were taken by women-headed households. The same proportion of households headed by women went to moneylenders for their primary loans, leaving 12.3 percentage of them to rely on family, relatives, neighbours and other friends for such help.

This divide in women's interests was also seen in other aspects of their living conditions. Even as 35.1 percentage of the women who headed households lived in houses with RCC roofs, 43.2 percentage made do with thatched or other less permanent roofs. The proportion of women-headed households in this transformation who practiced open defecation was much lower than that in the other transformations. Within this transformation, 43.2 percentage of women-headed households had toilets inside their homes, while as many as 39.2 percentage practiced open defecation, whether due to the absence of a toilet at home, traditional practice, or any other reason.

Inequality among women who headed households in the Local Non-farm transformation provided considerable scope for strategic gender interests. The proportion of landless households among those headed by women was 11.9 percentage points more than among the same proportion of households headed by men. There was an even larger difference in the cultivation of land that was owned by the households, with 60 percentage of the men who headed households being cultivators compared to 24.3 percentage among women who headed households.

In terms of access to loans, 61.9 percentage of the borrowing men who headed households had their primary loan from official sources, and 24.8 percentage from moneylenders. The proportion of women heads of households who had their primary loans from official sources was 20.4 percentage points lower than their male counterparts, and their dependence on moneylenders for primary loans was 16.7 percentage points greater.

Gender difference extended to living conditions as well. The proportion of households headed by men who lived in houses with RCC roofs was 8.2 percentage points greater than households headed by women, while the proportion who lived in houses with thatched and other less permanent roofs was as much as 20.9 percentage points lower.

The intersectionality of gender differences with other inequalities had its impact on practical gender interests. Relatively better economic conditions in this transformation gave some households the option of discriminating against women going out to work. As a result, the gender difference within households in terms of working outside the home was quite substantial with 58.2 percentage of women-headed revealing discrimination against women working outside the home as against 46.9 percentage for households headed by men. Further, the proportion of women-households that practiced gender discrimination in education was, at 67.3 percentage, not all that much less than the 70.7 percentage recorded by households headed by men.

### *Entering Agriculture Transformation*

In contrast to the other three transformations that were moving away from agriculture, the Entering Agriculture transformation indicated a movement in the opposite direction. The motivation for this movement was varied as there were a few who moved into large modern farms and others who were the many who returned to the shelter of the village home when urban opportunities were lacking. Without having to deal with the high costs of the city, the migration capital required to move to a rural location tended to be much less intimidating. This reduced the compulsions on the man to venture out alone, before taking the rest of his family with him. Consequently, there were fewer women being left behind, with just 6.8 percentage of the households being headed by women, well below the level in the other transformations.

The women's interests in this transformation were centred around their role in the movement into agriculture. As many as 91.7 percentage of the women who headed households declared agriculture as their main economic activity—41.7 percentage were cultivators and 50.0 percentage were agricultural labourers. In addition, 60.4 percentage of the women who headed households declared agricultural labour or cultivation as their secondary activity as well. Near-total dependence on agriculture was not particularly helpful in easing economic conditions as only 12.5 percentage of the women who headed households lived in houses with RCC roofs—the lowest across the four transformations—and

39.6 percentage of their houses had either thatched or some other less permanent roofs. In terms of everyday practices too there was near-universal open defecation, with 97.9 percentage of the women who headed households following this practice. It did not also help that as many as 35.4 percentage of the women who headed households did not have a ration card, by far the highest figure across all transformations. Further, their ability to borrow was limited, as reflected in the fact that 47.9 percentage of the women who headed households did not have any loans. The support from official lending sources was substantial with 48.0 percentage of the women heads of households who did borrow being able to tap banks and non-banking financial institutions for their primary loan, but 28 percentage still had to rely on the moneylender for the primary loan and another 24 percentage fell back on the family, relatives, neighbours and other friends.

Even in the face of this extreme deprivation, the scope to pursue strategic gender interests was evident in the extent of gender differences. While the movement into agriculture was widespread there was a striking gender difference in their role within agriculture. A vast majority of the men who headed households—78.4 percentage—were cultivators and only 12.5 percentage of them declared their main activity to be agricultural labour. The pattern was much more even for women, with 41.7 percentage of the women heads of households declaring themselves as cultivators, while 50 percentage saw themselves as primarily agricultural labour.

While deprivation ensured that the proportion of men who headed households and practiced open defecation was already high at 89.3 percentage, the same proportion for women who headed households was a further 8.6 percentage points higher. Again, the proportion of men who headed households who lived in houses with a thatched or other less permanent roof was, at 26.4 percentage, not insignificant; but for women-headed households the proportion was 13.2 percentage points higher. The ability of women heads of households to avoid the local moneylender was also more limited as the proportion who went to them for their primary loan was 13.1 percentage points greater than for men. In domains where the women heads of households did relatively well, the men who headed their households did substantially better. While the women heads of households could tap banks and non-banking financial institutions for 48 percentage of their primary loans, the same proportion for men who headed households was 27.5 percentage points higher.

The pursuit of women's interests in situations marked by both deprivation and considerable scope for the pursuit of strategic gender



interests influenced the pursuit of practical gender interests by women-headed households. Deprivation ensured a dire need to increase the earnings of the household, a need that did not offer scope for gender discrimination in allowing women to work outside the home. Thus, the proportion of households headed by men who discriminated against women joining the workforce was the lowest among the four transformations, at 27.3 percentage. This proportion was even lower, at 16.3 percentage in households headed by women. Beyond trying to tap the work opportunities provided by agriculture, however, gender bias was quite strong in households headed by men. There was a shared belief with other transformations in the value of education for future job prospects with resources of the households headed by men being directed towards their own gender. As many as 60.2 percentage of the households headed by men discriminated against women in education. However, in their pursuit of practical gender interests in this transformation, women who headed households were far less inclined to simply follow the norm set by the households headed by men, as the proportion that discriminated against women in education dropped sharply to 25.6 percentage.

## **Negotiating with Patriarchy**

The experience of women who head households in the midst of India's rural transformation brings to the fore the relationship between women's interests, strategic gender interests and practical gender interests. Women's interests that emerge from the overall situation in which they find themselves, were deeply influenced by the forms of rural transformation. Some transformations had a much higher presence of households headed by women than others, with the proportion of such households in the Leaving Rural transformation being six times higher than in the Entering Agriculture transformation. Precise roles in these transformations were also very different: the proportion of women who headed households working in agriculture as their main activity ranged from under 13 percentage in the Leaving Rural transformation to nearly 92 percentage in the Entering Agriculture transformation. Women's interests were further influenced by inequalities within transformations.

The diversity of women's interests did not remove the possibility of shared gender interests, evident in the gender differences within each form of transformation. Across all transformations, including the Entering Agriculture transformation, a greater proportion of the households headed



by women were landless, compared to those headed by men. Gender differences extended to basic living conditions and these were at times reduced by the extent of deprivation. In these situations, the conditions faced by households headed by both men and women were so adverse that there was not much scope for gender difference. The proportion of households living under RCC roofs in the Entering Agriculture transformation was so low that there was virtually no difference between the households headed by women and those headed by men. But once conditions improved, gender differences emerged.

Strategic gender interest in the removal of these gender differences was not always reflected in practical gender interests as women who headed households also had to consider other realistic factors. They were under pressure to enhance overall household income but in a work environment characterised by gender inequality, this often resulted in a distinct gender bias within the household. All transformations recorded discrimination against women in both participation in the workforce as well as in education in a significant proportion of women-headed households. Practical gender interests only ensured that the proportion of households with these biases was lower in the case of those headed by women than in those headed by men. But there were exceptions to this pattern. In the Marginal Worker transformation, the especially adverse economic condition of the households headed by women appear to have prompted them to divert greater resources to educating men in the hope of improving household earnings. This meant that a greater proportion of houses headed by women discriminated against women in education than was the case in the households headed by men. In the relatively better off Local Non-farm transformation, households headed by women were more wary of sending women out to work than households headed by men.

Women's interests are influenced by their overall, situation which in turn is influenced by the type of transformation the household finds itself in as well as the role of the woman in that household. Their ability to respond to situations is constrained by discrimination and gender differences of various kinds. Though these gender differences provide scope for strategic gender interests, they may not always be a priority for women. They may find it necessary to follow their practical gender interests, which could even include the perpetuation of some discrimination, if usually to a lower degree than would be the case with men. Finally, this exploration of women's interests and gender interests has focused on the diversity of these interests especially across varied rural transformations. While the issues raised have been quite wide-ranging, they are not comprehensive. There are aspects, like the role of the state, that deserve greater attention and could be the subject for further research.

**Table 1.** Select Features of Households by Gender and Transformation.

	Leaving Rural Transformation		Marginal Worker Transformation		Local Non-farm Transformation		Entering Agriculture Transformation	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Heads of households	59.1	40.9	87.0	13.0	89.4	10.6	93.3	6.8
Living Conditions								
Thatched/temporary roofs	20.8	30.3	2.65	6.9	22.3	43.2	26.4	39.6
RCC roofs	41.3	37.7	16.3	12.6	43.3	35.1	12.1	12.5
Open defecation	79.0	84.2	89.6	96.6	35.3	39.2	89.3	97.9
No ration card	13.6	15.2	20.4	18.4	1.3	2.7	12.4	35.4
Source of Primary Loans								
Official sources	25.4	16.5	9.0	4.6	37.2	23.0	17.4	20.8
Moneylender	0.9	1.6	4.9	4.6	14.9	23.0	9.1	14.6
Neighbours, friends and relatives	6.7	7.4	9.3	11.5	5.3	6.8	5.0	12.5
NBFCs	7.1	6.8	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	28.6	4.2
No loans	48.0	61.0	75.4	79.3	39.8	44.6	39.1	47.9
Land Ownership								
Landless	22.8	38.4	46.0	66.7	24.6	36.5	15.1	29.2
>0 ≤ 2	68.8	58.1	51.2	33.3	45.0	35.1	26.7	20.8
>2 ≤ 5	6.3	3.2	2.4	0.0	20.9	20.3	34.7	35.4
Proportion of heads of landowning households who are cultivators	43.1	9.8	24.6	10.5	79.6	38.3	92.4	58.8

(Table 1 continued)

(Table 1 continued)

	Leaving Rural Transformation		Marginal Worker Transformation		Local Non-farm Transformation		Entering Agriculture Transformation	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Main Activity of Heads of Households								
Cultivator	33.7	6.1	16.2	4.6	60.0	24.3	78.4	41.7
Agricultural labour	14.5	6.8	7.7	10.3	11.7	6.8	12.5	50.0
Other wage labour	25.5	14.2	54.1	10.3	5.0	2.7	1.5	0.0
Domestic duties	0.2	50.3	1.0	46.0	0.6	10.8	0.5	0.0
Indicators of Gender Discrimination Within the Household								
Education	68.9	59.8	58.2	71.1	70.7	67.3	60.2	25.6
Work	75.2	51.1	73.4	44.7	46.9	58.2	27.3	16.3

**Source:** NIAS survey 2017.

**Notes:** RCC: Reinforced cement concrete. NBFCC refers to non-banking finance company, official sources are banks, Self Help Groups, Kisan Credit Cards, and post offices.

All figures are in percentage of total households except in the case of cultivators among land owning households.

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