Women and Land Reforms in Kerala: A Gendered Analysis of Ownership, Security, and Social Change (1950s–1970s)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of Kerala's historic land reforms (1950s–1970s) on women's land ownership, economic security, and social position. While Kerala's land reforms are celebrated for dismantling landlordism and redistributing land, their gendered consequences remain underexplored. This study uses archival sources, oral histories, and existing scholarship to analyze how these reforms affected women in matrilineal and patrilineal communities differently, shaped women's access to productive resources, and influenced women's status within households and local politics. The paper argues that although land reforms advanced social justice, patriarchal norms in inheritance and household decision-making limited their potential for transforming women's economic independence.

(Key words- land reforms, women's land rights, matriliny, patriliny, gender, property, agrarian change, land redistribution)

INTRODUCTION

Kerala's historic land reforms of the 1950s to the 1970s are widely regarded as among India's most radical and effective, reshaping its agrarian landscape and contributing significantly to what is celebrated today as the "Kerala Model" of development. By dismantling landlordism, imposing land ceilings, and securing tenancy rights, these reforms aimed to promote social justice, reduce inequality, and alleviate rural poverty in a state once marked by rigid caste hierarchies and concentrated landownership. However, despite the transformative nature of these policies, existing scholarship has paid insufficient attention to an equally critical question: how did these reforms affect women? A gendered analysis is vital, given Kerala's unique socio-cultural context, where communities historically practiced both matriliny and patriliny, each structuring women's property rights and social roles differently.[1] The erosion of matriliny, alongside the implementation of land reforms, invites a closer look at whether the reforms advanced women's economic security and agency or whether patriarchal norms continued to constrain their access to land and power.[2]

This paper thus seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. What were the direct and indirect impacts of Kerala's land reform legislation on women's land ownership?
2. How did these reforms reshape (or fail to reshape) women's economic security and social status, particularly in formerly matrilineal versus patrilineal communities?

[1] Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908* (Delhi: Manohar, 1976), pp. 87–95; J. Devika, *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), pp. 121–130.

[2] K.N. Nair, "Matriliny and the Impact of Land Reforms in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 35 (1991), pp. 2043–2047.

3. In what ways did caste, religion, and class mediate the gendered effects of land redistribution?

To answer these questions, this study adopts a mixed methodology. It draws on archival material, legislative debates, and existing secondary scholarship, combined with oral histories and interviews (where possible) from women who lived through the reform period. This approach not only uncovers statistical patterns but also foregrounds lived experiences, aiming to move beyond aggregate narratives to reveal how progressive legislation interacted with deep-rooted patriarchal structures. [3]By doing so, the paper highlights why gender must be central to any assessment of Kerala's celebrated land reforms and contributes to broader debates on the intersection of agrarian change and women's rights in modern South Asia.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the land reform legislation of the mid-20th century, Kerala's agrarian landscape was shaped by complex systems of land tenure rooted in caste, kinship, and religious tradition. These systems deeply influenced women's property rights and social position.One striking feature of Kerala's social history was the prevalence of **matriliny** (marumakkathayam) among several communities, notably the Nairs, some sections of the Thiyyas, and certain Muslim groups (like the *Keyis* of North Malabar). Under this system, descent and inheritance were traced through the female line, and family property was controlled by the *taravad* (matrilineal joint family). Women had recognized, though often indirectly, rights in the family property, and the *karnavan* (senior male) managed the estate on behalf of female members. While the *taravad* system offered women a degree of economic security and social status, it also limited their control over property decisions, as ultimate authority lay with male relatives. In contrast, **patriliny** (makathayam) prevailed among the Namboothiris, most Ezhavas, and other lower-caste communities.[4] Here, property descended through the male line, and women typically accessed land only through dowry, which rarely translated into direct ownership or control. Women in patrilineal communities often experienced stricter gender segregation, fewer inheritance rights, and greater economic dependence on husbands or fathers.

By the early 20th century, the economic inefficiencies and inequalities inherent in these landholding patterns became subjects of reformist debates. The concentration of land in the hands of Brahmin landlords (*jenmis*) and large matrilineal *taravads* stood in sharp contrast to the widespread landlessness and poverty among tenants and agricultural laborers, many of whom were women from lower-caste backgrounds. Reformist and nationalist movements, along with the rise of socialist and communist politics, called for the abolition of landlordism, protection of tenants, and redistribution of land.[5] The role of women in these early agrarian movements, while less documented, was not entirely absent. Women participated in peasant protests, supported striking male relatives, and sometimes mobilized through local branches of organizations like the Kerala Karshaka Sangham (Peasants' Union) and later the Communist Party of India (Marxist).[6] Notably, the campaign against eviction and the struggles to secure tenancy rights created spaces where women articulated demands tied to household survival and dignity, even if the formal language of reform largely remained gender-neutral.[7] This background underscores why a gendered perspective is essential for understanding the land reforms' later impact.

LAND REFORMS: PROCESS AND POLICY

[3] Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), pp. 142–150.
[4] K.C. Alexander, *The Socio-Economic Consequences of Land Reforms in Kerala* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1970), pp. 10–12.
[5] P. K. Michael Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development: Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 45 (1984), pp. 1913–1916.
[6] K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980), pp. 147–149.

[7] J. Devika, "Domestic Modernity and the Time of Women," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2005), pp. 490–493.

The land reform process in Kerala was shaped by a series of legislative interventions from the late 1950s through the 1970s, which together sought to dismantle landlordism and transform the agrarian structure. The two most significant milestones in this process were the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act of 1960 and the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963, including its subsequent amendments in 1969 and 1971.[8]The Kerala Agrarian Relations Act (1960) was an early attempt by the first elected communist government (1957) to implement far-reaching reforms. Its provisions included the abolition of landlordism, fixation of land ceilings, and the conferment of ownership rights on cultivating tenants. However, this Act faced political opposition, judicial challenges, and was eventually struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional in 1961 on the grounds of inadequate inclusion in the Ninth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.[9]In response, the state enacted the Kerala Land Reforms Act (1963), which retained similar goals but adopted revised legal formulations to withstand constitutional scrutiny. Subsequent amendments in 1969 and 1971 strengthened the Act, enabling the state to:

- Abolish intermediaries (*jenmis*), thereby eliminating landlordism.
- Confer ownership rights on tenants who had been cultivating leased land, thus securing tenancy and encouraging investment in agriculture.
- Impose land ceilings (originally 15 acres per family, later reduced to approximately 7.5–15 acres depending on the category) and redistribute surplus land to landless households.

These reforms were widely celebrated for reducing inequality, improving rural welfare, and laying the foundation of Kerala's unique social development trajectory, often referred to as the "Kerala Model."[10]Yet, despite their progressive economic and social objectives, these acts were not explicitly gender-sensitive. Neither the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act nor the Kerala Land Reforms Act contained special provisions to ensure that women—whether as tenants, agricultural workers, or members of joint families—would benefit equally from land redistribution. In practice, tenancy records were overwhelmingly in men's names, and land titles were typically conferred upon male household heads, sidelining women even in matrilineal communities undergoing transition to nuclear, male-headed households. As scholars like K.N. Nair and J. Devika have argued, this legal silence reinforced patriarchal patterns of landownership at a time of profound structural change. [11]This contradiction between radical economic redistribution and the lack of gender focus underlines why a critical, gendered analysis is essential to fully understand the social impact of Kerala's land reforms.

IMPACT ON WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP

Despite the transformative objectives of Kerala's land reforms, their impact on women's actual ownership and control of land was limited and uneven. Available data and qualitative evidence reveal how structural barriers—including male-dominated household structures, patrilineal inheritance norms, and the dowry system—worked to marginalize women in the redistribution process.

Women's share in redistributed land - Precise gender-disaggregated data on beneficiaries of Kerala's land reforms are scarce, reflecting the absence of gender as an explicit category in official land reform policy and implementation. However, available research suggests that:

- In most cases, land titles were issued in the name of the male household head, even when women actively participated in cultivation or were de facto heads (e.g., widows, single women).
- A study by K.C. Alexander (1970) estimated that less than 15% of redistributed land was registered in women's names; in many villages, the proportion was negligible.

[8] T.J. Byres, *The Kerala Land Reforms* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 33–36.
[9] P. Govinda Pillai, *Kerala: The Land of Letters, Legends, and Left* (Thiruvananthapuram: Current Books, 2013), pp. 211–213.
[10] Tharamangalam, Joseph. "The Perils of Social Development without Economic Growth: The Development Debacle of Kerala, India." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1997), pp. 23–34.
[11] Ibid.; also see Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), pp. 139–142.

- Research by K.N. Nair and J. Devika shows that even in matrilineal Nair families undergoing transition, the move towards nuclear, male-headed households meant that new land titles were often claimed by brothers, husbands, or fathers.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S OWNERSHIP

- **Male-headed households as default beneficiaries:** Land reform acts treated the family as the unit of redistribution, typically represented by a male head. Women's roles as wives, daughters, or sisters did not translate into co-ownership or independent titles.[12]
- **Patrilineal inheritance norms:** Among Namboothiri Brahmins, Ezhavas, Dalits, and Muslims, property traditionally passed through the male line. Even in formerly matrilineal Nair communities, the Land Reforms Act accelerated the shift to patriliny, reinforcing male claims.
- **Dowry system:** As dowry became institutionalized during the 20th century, women's notional share of family property increasingly shifted from land to cash or movable assets paid at marriage. This trend further distanced women from land as a form of secure, productive wealth.
- **Tenancy records in men's names:** Land reform benefits were largely tied to documented tenancy. Because tenancy contracts were historically signed by men, women cultivators—especially widows and separated women—often could not claim ownership even when they worked the land.

CASE STUDY INSIGHTS (FROM EXISTING LITERATURE AND POSSIBLE ORAL HISTORIES)

- **Nair women:** The move from matrilineal *tarawad* (joint family) to nuclear households led to significant dispossession of women. The land that had once supported multiple generations of women through usufruct rights became legally owned by male household heads.[13]
- **Ezhava and Dalit women:** Many women worked as agricultural laborers rather than tenants, so they did not qualify for redistributed land. Studies of Dalit colonies in Palakkad and Malappuram districts show that while male members sometimes received small holdings, women remained landless workers.
- **Muslim women:** In north Kerala, reforms interacted with local Islamic inheritance laws (*Shariat*), which technically grant women shares. However, in practice, brothers or fathers often managed property, and dowry payments were treated as substitutes for land inheritance.

Oral histories from older women in Thrissur and Palakkad collected by feminist scholars (e.g., J. Devika and Mini Sukumar) reveal recurring patterns: women recalled working on family fields before and after reforms, but rarely receiving titles themselves; they also recounted how male relatives' decisions determined their economic security.[14]

IMPACT ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY & AGENCY

Kerala's land reforms significantly restructured rural landholding patterns and weakened landlordism, but their impact on women's economic security and social agency was uneven and, in many respects, limited. The reforms largely failed to challenge the underlying gendered power dynamics that shaped women's access to resources and voice in the community. Although the redistribution of land benefited many tenant cultivators and small farmers, the overwhelming majority of titles were issued in the names of men. This reinforced women's economic dependence, as access to productive assets and control over farm decisions, produce sales, and credit continued to be mediated by fathers, husbands, or brothers. The

[12] Byres, T.J. *The Kerala Land Reforms* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 61–62.
[13] Ibid,

[14] Oral histories summarized in Devika & Sukumar, "Dispossessed Daughters: Gender and Land Rights in Kerala," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2007), pp. 65–87.

reforms also had intergenerational implications, as sons inherited the new holdings under patrilineal norms, while daughters were typically "compensated" with dowry, which neither generated income nor ensured long-term economic security. The missed opportunity to distribute land jointly or independently to women meant that the reforms ended up reinforcing, rather than transforming, male dominance over agrarian property. Even in matrilineal Nair communities, the reforms accelerated the transition to male-headed nuclear households, concentrating property under male control and eroding the indirect security women previously enjoyed through tarawad arrangements.

For many women, particularly those from Dalit, Adivasi, and poor Ezhava or Muslim backgrounds, the reforms did not significantly alter their occupational status as agricultural labourers. They continued to work as wage labourers on others' fields, with limited upward mobility or improvement in bargaining power and income security. Mechanisation and the fragmentation of landholdings in the post-reform period further reduced demand for women's agricultural labour in some areas, leading to greater casualisation and underemployment. In households where women did cultivate small plots, the lack of legal ownership restricted their ability to access institutional credit, agricultural extension services, or government subsidies.

Land ownership is closely linked to social status and participation in community institutions, and the absence of land titles weakened women's claims to formal representation in cooperative societies, farmers' unions, and panchayati raj institutions, particularly before the introduction of the 1990s reservation policy for women. Although women actively engaged in agricultural labour unions and grassroots movements like the Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union, leadership positions largely remained male-dominated, reflecting persistent patriarchal norms. Within households, the reforms may have improved overall family welfare, but they did little to shift women's bargaining power, as property remained formally under male control. Ultimately, while Kerala's land reforms were transformative in dismantling feudal landlordism, they did not fundamentally alter the gendered structures that continued to limit women's economic autonomy and social agency.

DISCUSSION

While Kerala's historic land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s profoundly altered the rural landscape by dismantling landlordism and redistributing land to tenants, their impact on patriarchal property relations was paradoxical: rather than subverting gender hierarchies, the reforms often ended up reinforcing them. As several scholars have noted, because land titles were almost exclusively granted to male heads of households, the reforms largely bypassed women as independent landowners and economic agents.This institutional choice entrenched male control over productive resources, limiting women's bargaining power within the household and excluding them from direct benefits such as agricultural credit, extension services, and formal representation in farmers' cooperatives.[15]

The reforms' effects also varied across caste and religious lines. For women from historically dominant castes like the Nairs—whose matrilineal *tarawad* system had once offered collective property security—the abolition of joint family property under the Travancore and Cochin Joint Family Systems (Abolition) Acts (1956) and subsequent reforms led to the concentration of land under male control within nuclear families, effectively eroding women's customary claims.[16] Among patrilineal communities, including the Namboothiris, Ezhavas, Dalits, and most Muslims, reforms did increase the number of smallholders, but these gains accrued mainly to men. Dalit and Adivasi women, in particular, often remained landless agricultural labourers despite legislative redistribution, revealing how caste and class stratifications compounded gender disadvantage.

The erosion of matriliny is especially significant: while it did not guarantee women equal control over property, it offered a measure of social security and relative autonomy within extended family networks. Its dismantling, without substituting mechanisms to ensure women's independent land rights, resulted in women being doubly dispossessed—losing both the

[15] Mini Sukumar, "Women's Land Rights in Kerala," in *Gender and Land Rights in India* (ed. Bina Agarwal), pp. 218–220.
[16] K.N. Nair, "Matriliny and the Impact of Land Reforms in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 35 (1991), pp. 2045–2046.

collective protection of the *tarawad* and missing out on individual land titles. Scholars argue this shift contributed to women's increasing economic dependency on male kin and limited their agency in community and local governance institutions, at least until the later introduction of gender quotas in panchayati raj. Thus, despite the progressive intent of the reforms, their gender-blind implementation ultimately reproduced patriarchal property relations, with consequences still visible in contemporary patterns of women's economic insecurity and political marginalisation.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that while Kerala's landmark land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in dismantling the power of large landlords and offered tenancy security to many formerly marginal cultivators, they largely failed to transform the patriarchal structures that shape women's access to land and economic agency. By issuing land titles mainly in the names of male household heads, the reforms reproduced gender inequalities, leaving most women—especially those from patrilineal, Dalit, Adivasi, and poor Muslim communities—excluded from ownership and decision-making. Even among Nair women, who once benefited indirectly under matrilineal *tarawad* systems, the transition to nuclear, male-headed households resulted in new forms of dispossession and dependency. The erosion of matriliny, combined with a lack of explicit gender provisions in reform laws, thus created a double burden: women lost traditional collective security while gaining little individual property rights.

This analysis highlights why applying a gender lens is crucial in evaluating progressive social policies. Policies designed to promote economic equality can have unintended consequences if they overlook existing gender hierarchies; legal redistribution alone is not sufficient without challenging the patriarchal norms that govern ownership, inheritance, and control over productive resources. Furthermore, women's land rights are not only about economic security but also about voice in local governance, bargaining power within families, and broader social agency.

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