Fempreneurs or organic tea farmers? Entrepreneurialism, resilience and alternative agriculture in Darjeeling, India

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Abstract

In this article I underscore how women organic tea farmers build economic resilience through dual enactments as "organic farmers" and as "entrepreneurs." In substantiating both, women question the limited optics through which Fair Trade type sustainability ventures measure their work for a tea cooperative, as well poorly recognizing their entrepreneurial work in their households and community. Women are deeply aware of the politics of Fair Trade where their productive and reproductive labor is appropriated through the labor of organics, where women not only produce the organic green leaf tea but also produce narratives of Fair Trade's success in its certification and gender audits. Thus, to understand what sustains the new wave of "sustainable agriculture" in the global South, we must explore the intersections of organic farming practices with emerging discourses and practices of gendered entrepreneurialism in organic farming communities. In Darjeeling, India, women provide the labor necessary to sustain organics that should ideally come from the Indian state or international trading partners. They fill the gap through their labor, time, creativity and risk-taking. I contend that the success of organic farming depends on critical maneuvers that entail economic and cultural entrepreneurialism, and demonstrate forms of resilience expressed through which women farmers identify and navigate the inadequacies of alternative agriculture and related Fair Trade practices.

Keywords: Women organic tea farmers, women entrepreneurs, Fair Trade, rural Darjeeling, risk-taking, resilience

Résumé

Dans cet article, je souligne comment les cultivatrices de thé biologique développent leur résilience économique en tant qu' «agricultrices biologiques» et en tant que «entrepreneurs». Pour concrétiser ces deux objectifs, les femmes s'interrogent sur l'optique limitée selon laquelle les entreprises du commerce équitable mesurent leur travail pour une coopérative de thé et reconnaissent mal leur travail entrepreneurial dans leur ménage et leur communauté. Les femmes sont profondément conscientes des politiques du commerce équitable qui s'approprient leur travail productif et reproductif: elles produisent non seulement le thé vert à la feuille mais produisent également des récits illustrant le succès du commerce équitable dans la certification et les audits de l.égalité des sexes. Pour comprendre ce qui soutient la nouvelle vague de «l'agriculture durable» dans les communautés d'agriculteurs biologiques des pays du Sud, nous devons explorer les intersections des pratiques d'agriculture biologique avec l'esprit d'entreprise des femmes. À Darjeeling, en Inde, les femmes fournissent le travail nécessaire pour soutenir la production de thé biologique, qui devrait idéalement provenir de l'État indien ou de partenaires commerciaux internationaux. Ils comblent les lacunes par leur travail, leur temps, leur créativité et leur prise de risque. Je soutiens que le succès de l'agriculture biologique dépend de performances critiques impliquant un esprit d'entreprise économique et culturel. Celles-ci démontrent également des formes de résilience, où les agricultrices identifient et naviguent à travers les insuffisances de «l'agriculture alternative» et du commerce équitable.

Mots-clés: Femmes productrices de thé biologique, femmes entrepreneures, commerce équitable, Darjeeling rural, prise de risque, resilience

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Resumen

¿Cómo es que la agricultura orgánica en India se ha mantenido en medio de la tentación de una revolución verde que permea políticas, práctica y subjetividades de agricultores de las comunidades locales? Para responder esta pregunta, propongo que exploremos las intersecciones de las prácticas agrícolas orgánicas con las formas emergentes de emprendeduría con perspectiva de género en comunidades de agricultura orgánica dentro de la India. Sostengo que el éxito de la agricultura orgánica depende de maniobras críticas que implican tanto emprendedurismo económico, como cultural, y demuestra formas de resiliencia expresadas a través de lo que llamo proyectos de valor con perspectiva de género. Un enfoque en proyectos de valor con perspectiva de género que se manifiestan a los niveles familiar y comunitario, nos permite entender cómo agricultores promedio en India entienden, viven, y actúan con respecto a los marcos regulatorios de comercio alternativo transnacional y regímenes agrícolas. Mientras la certificación orgánica de mercancías agrícolas prolifera de manera global, muchas comunidades agrícolas marginalizadas se incorporan a los sistemas comerciales orgánicos transnacionales en tiempos en que el género se evalúa como un distintivo central. Por ejemplo, la certificación de comercio justo apunta a la creación de oportunidades en el aumento de capacidad de perspectiva de género, al crear oportunidades financieras para mujeres productoras marginalizadas. Con base en más de una década de trabajo etnográfico con pequeñas productoras dedicadas al té en Darjeeling, documento sus prolongadas dificultades para negociar estas prácticas regulatorias transnacionales a través del avance estratégico de sus proyectos de valor con perspectiva de género. Aquí, una parte integral de estos avances estratégicos incluyen los performances de un discurso de sostenibilidad global, combinado con formas de emprendedurismo subversivo para enfrentar la falta de sostenibilidad social en iniciativas de comercio y agricultura alternativas.

Palabras clave: Mujeres productoras de té orgánico, mujeres empresarias, comercio justo, Darjeeling rural, asunción de riesgos, resiliencia.

1. Introduction

I called Binu in late March to see how everyone at Sānu Krishak Sansthā (SKS) was doing. SKS was a successful small farmer's organic tea cooperative in Darjeeling. After updating me on Makhmali SHG's (Self Help Group) Women's Day celebration on March 8th she added, "there is one bad news. FLO (Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International) Fair Trade funds have stopped coming to SKS without any reason, but the organic green leaf tea sales from SKS to a local plantation was up from the previous year." She implied that the plantation conglomerate that was in an informal non-governmental contract with SKS to buy their green tea leaves had dropped SKS from their Fair Trade operations. Small scale organic tea producers in Darjeeling's out-of-the-way places – living in the shadow trenches of big plantations – often rely on yearly contracts with plantations to get their raw green tea processed and marketed in the absence of their own processing factories and marketing infrastructure. SKS was also accessing the Fair Trade market in the West through this conglomerate, selling their tea through Equal Exchange. The plantation had not kept up the Fair Trade end of the bargain/contract. For the first time since commencing Fair Trade a decade ago, the money for small farmer grown Fair Trade organic certified tea had stopped.

This event should be seen in the context of other developments in Darjeeling's informal tea sector, where new contractual relations between plantations and smallholder tea farmers (those without processing units) are on the rise. SKS found out from this particular tea conglomerate that their tea was not selling very well in Western countries. This narrative corroborated my own observations about the marketing of SKS's tea in North America. I kept a close eye on my local store's tea aisle and most recently stopped seeing SKS tea packs for the first time in many years. The conglomerate was selling from their other "Fair Trade projects" but not SKS. They were still telling the small farmer story to cash in on the charm cooperatives have among Western consumers, but SKS small farmers were no longer the characters in these stories of Fair Trade's success in Darjeeling.

Figure 1 shows a picture of Equal Exchange's labeled Fair Trade "Small Farmer Grown" tea from Darjeeling, found on a recent visit to a local store in the Atlanta suburbs. Until a few months ago, one could see SKS's story, especially their womens' stories, on these kinds of packets. Note the nod to small farmers on this pack too, but this replaces the story of SKS, the oldest small farmers' cooperative in Darjeeling.

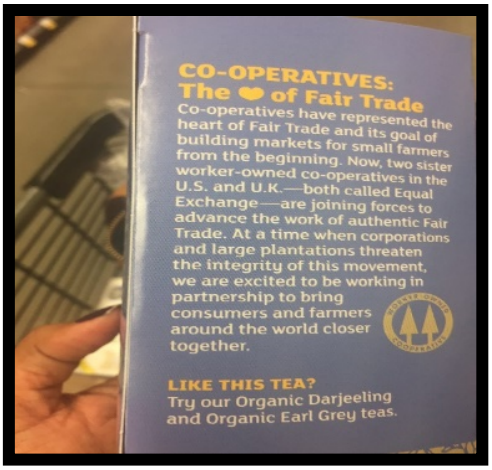

Figure 1: Equal Exchange's labeled Fair Trade "Small Farmer Grown" tea from Darjeeling. I have not included sections of the box that name the Indian tea conglomerate and the Darjeeling plantation they mention here as "farmers." Source: author.

Binu was not sad. There was indifference to this development, unlike previous Fair Trade and organic farming related setbacks for SKS, which had made women tea farmers anxious (especially in households where income really depended on selling their green leaf tea to plantations). Her Makhmali SHG, consisting of almost a dozen women organic tea farmers, had dissociated themselves from the cooperative a few years ago. She sold her family's green tea to the plantation via the cooperative, but their everyday wellbeing now depended on their SHG-based daily entrepreneurial ventures selling *hāthe chiā* (hand rolled and home processed organic Darjeeling tea, which is not recognized as legal by the Darjeeling Tea Association) along with other food and craft products.

This indifference was a turning point in understanding how alternative agriculture and its "sustainability" was interpreted by some of its beneficiaries in the Global South. Why would women who produced the time-consuming labor of growing organic tea, including those who rallied their communities to support and maintain good organic standards, display such ambivalence toward this sudden abandonment by a regular income provider (the plantation)? Cash from the Fair Trade premium (in addition to the compensation for green tea) was used for many community development projects in the SKS associated villages. These women had in the past decade fought the male-dominated SKS for Fair Trade funds as compensation for their "labor of organics." They had performed stories of empowerment in front of inspectors, and still do – evident from the interviews with some of them on "WhatsApp".

My objective in this article is to highlight how women organic farmers build resilience through dual enactment as "organic farmers" and "entrepreneurs." In substantiating both positions, women question the limited optics through which Fair Trade-type ventures measure their work for the cooperative, as well as the misrecognition of their entrepreneurial work in their households and communities. Women are deeply aware of the politics of Fair Trade where their productive and reproductive labor is appropriated through the labor of organics where women not only produce the organic green leaf tea but also produce narratives of Fair Trade's success in certification's gender audits. Their images and narratives are used to build virtualities (West 2012; see also Cornwall and Edwards 2014; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007) which elide the everyday battles over resource and recognition at the heart of these organic tea-producing communities. In the context of these deep fissures around resource access, women's situated knowledge of tea production and associated skills are denied in a patriarchal setup by a context-specific vector of shame (see also Schroeder 1999). However, such disciplining practices encounter women's critical maneuvers around the denial of their labor. I underscore how women tea

farmers often use the word "*riks*" [a variation of the English word risk] to draw attention to the dangers of their specific entrepreneurial ventures in addition to tea production. Entrepreneurial performances and practices affect their reputation and household dynamics, but women hold onto them for the survival of their households and their own aspirations. Thus in Darjeeling's rural areas, Fair Trade-related discourse and practice has opened up a new way for women to talk about their labor:

a) women in Darjeeling's poorest villages have developed a very different understanding of what they term *riks* than microcredit-promoting development NGOs, when the latter discuss 'risky economic behaviour.
b) these different interpretations of credit and risk reveal the situated nature of economic practices and highlight the deep connection between inter- and intra-household power inequalities. The latter, women believe, puts them at danger as they engage in borrowing and repaying money. Fair Trade, with its promise of empowerment, is unable to mitigate these issues.
c) women navigate these strictures by demonstrating creative collective social agency (including through establishing Makhmali SHG) that in turn has had important, unintended consequences for them and community resilience.

In other words, women's entrepreneurial practice is deeply embedded in the social and cultural context in which they live. For many women, the experience of negotiating the cultural and economic tensions thrown up by taking loans and then paying them off by trading in contraband tea and other goods, has led them to abandon banks in favour of inter-lending among their own self-help groups. They also do not expect Fair Trade money from SKS to contribute towards their efforts.

Just like the packet of tea shown in Figure 1, which talks about the cooperatives as being the heart of Fair Trade, women also establish that they are the key engine for the nourishment and viability of their communities. To play on the 'heart' metaphor, women pump blood through their everyday labor to make their community function, but they constantly encounter risk and shame as their productive and reproductive labor is belittled. Women are hyper-visible in Fair Trade propaganda but often complained to me that no one in their community cares for them, despite their many contributions. Shame and blame operates in how women are seen by Fair Trade activists, and by those who enter or view the household from within (including their family members). It is evident that the shame and blame helps to control women of the Women's Wing[2] (now Makhmali) by putting women at "*riks*", but such tactics may not have the desired outcome of disciplining women on controlling the scale of their business.

While the invisibility of women's work in calculating gross national product has been well-documented in feminist political ecology (Baksh and Harcourt 2015; see also Mies 1982 and Katz 1991), much less discussed is women's invisible work that promotes the economic resilience of poor communities. Feminist social scientist call upon the policy and academic world to document how women's labor, especially the household-level affective work of social reproduction, is devalued (Rai *et al.* 2013). The oversight is noteworthy since in the world of international development, there was a strong focus on women's empowerment, entrepreneurship and leadership after the fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.[3] The existing systems used to account for women's contribution to economic and social development in communities often ignore the complex relationships between women in the Global South (especially in rural areas) and the development processes which seek to 'empower' them. A feminist intersectional lens (Cho *et al.* 2013) is crucial to understand these complexities and to account for women's everyday work in maintaining community and household relationships in the context of trade, agriculture, and the use and return of loans. These cultural and social activities are as important as economic practices in building resilient communities amidst changing development regimes.

[2] Smallholder women tea farmer's organization, operating below the level of cooperatives (Sen 2017: 136).

[3] The Fourth World Conference on Women: *Action for Equality, Development and Peace* was held by the United Nations in Beijing, China, from 4-15 September 1995.

To understand what sustains the new wave of "sustainable agriculture" in Indian organic farming communities we must explore the intersections of organic farming practices with emerging forms of gendered entrepreneurialism. Women provide the necessary labor for sustaining organic production systems, that should ideally come from the Indian state or international trading partners. They fill a gap through their labor, time, creativity, risk-taking, and affect. I contend that the success of organic farming depends on economic and cultural entrepreneurialism and forms of resilience expressed through navigating the inadequacies of alternative agriculture and related Fair Trade practices. For instance, Fair Trade certification aims to create opportunities for gender-sensitive capacity-building by creating financial opportunities for marginalized women producers. Based on more than a decade of ethnographic fieldwork in the Darjeeling among women smallholder tea farmers, their protracted struggles require negotiating these transnational regulatory practices through tactical advancement of their own entrepreneurial ambitions. An integral part of this includes performing a global sustainability discourse, combined with subversive entrepreneurialism to address the lack of social sustainability in alternative trade and agriculture initiatives.

I have divided this article into four sections followed by a conclusion. The second section provides necessary details about smallholder tea production in Darjeeling and its relation to plantation tea production. Drawing on my ethnographic research, section three underscores why entrepreneurial performances became necessary and their relationship to household politics. The fourth section presents evidence of how women justify their entrepreneurial ambitions to their family and community members, and overturning the vector of shame through which they are disciplined by their kith and kin. The final section details women tea farmers' understanding of risk and resilience in the context of the Fair Trade movement, and their performance and substantiation of their entrepreneur status.

2. Tea production and women's economic roles in Darjeeling

In Darjeeling (Figure 2), rural women contribute to the production of agricultural cash crops in tea plantations and across the rural economy. The plantation sector formally employs approximately 60,000 workers, but women make up 60% of the workforce and dominate seasonal labor recruitment, although numbers are kept secret by plantation authorities (Sen 2014). With increasing male out-migration to other areas in India offering better economic opportunities, the feminization of agriculture and informal work more generally is on the rise. Women engage in a variety of subsistence activities spanning rural and urban locations. All economic activities in the Darjeeling District are shaped by a cultural politics of relations between ethnic groups including Nepalis, Bhutias, Lepchas, Bengalis, Marwaris and Biharis. Although Nepalis are numerically dominant in Darjeeling, they may not occupy the most lucrative positions in business and white-collar work because of colonial and post-colonial pasts (Sen 2017). All minority ethnic groups within India are struggling to make a living in the face of dwindling economic opportunities, particularly those in politically and economically fragile border districts like Darjeeling.

Between 2004 and 2011, I observed a core group of thirty women in the tea cooperative mentioned and undertook numerous interviews with community members. The women all belonged to poor Nepali Hindu households located in rural Darjeeling and practiced a combination of petty trade and agriculture on their small, family-owned plots of hilly land (Sen 2014). They were mostly illiterate and did not enjoy the benefits of salaried plantation work. These demographic details are important for two reasons. Firstly, plantations are so ubiquitous in Darjeeling that the lives of those who work in the vast informal agricultural sectors off the plantations are rarely documented. Secondly, drawing on the local politics of gender, the women in this study distinguished themselves from plantation workers because of the stigma attached to plantation work. As Hindus, all of these informants also distinguished themselves from Tibetan women (Bhoteni) who traded in the urban markets. Their self-identification as respectable Hindu housewives working on their family-owned farms while engaging in petty trade influenced how they assessed the social risk of taking microcredit loans since it harmed their respectability within villages where women's dealings with non-kin/kith-based men were looked down upon. Thus, women loan-takers from these rural areas did not want their reputations affected like women plantation workers of Darjeeling who were often described as hardworking but whimsical and promiscuous, based on colonial and post-colonial sexualized stereotypes about Nepali women (Sen 2017). Their frustration with micro-credit and their development of

alternatives needs to be understood in relation to these social dynamics (Mayoux 2001; Moodie 2008), including household politics (Mies 1982).

Figure 2: Darjeeling, India. Source: WikiCommons.

Before the advent of microcredit, women combined agriculture with various forms of petty trade that were indistinguishable from their activities as housewives. The world of small trade and entrepreneurialism was, therefore, not new to women in rural Darjeeling, nor was borrowing money; before microcredit, they dealt with village moneylenders, often-times their kith and kin. They sold surplus food from household agriculture and sought loans from local middlemen for business. This form of diversified household procurement is quite common in Darjeeling's non-plantation rural areas. In the villages surrounding Darjeeling town, women entrepreneurs grew crops and regularly sold staples such as alcohol, sweets, vegetables, hand-rolled tea, ramen noodles, *khaini* (chewing tobacco), washing powder and other sundry items that they acquired from town. But none of the village women regularly sold goods in the market or had permanent shops in town, which would have countered their primary self-identification as housewives. It is important to understand that women perceived their economic pursuits as an extension of their role of procurement – *sakaunu* – for household needs. *Sakaunu* was central to the economic and social reproduction of households and to the social norms, which governed women's household labor. It concealed the fact that women's entrepreneurialism helped to build their communities. These small ventures enabled women borrowers to stretch the family's cash income without upsetting the gendered moral universe of their villages. These low-key and flexible entrepreneurial activities did not require large investments or NGO support. They occurred through personal kin and kith networks connected to informal trading circuits that sustained rural communities in the face of massive unemployment.

A major moment in these economic activities occurred in the 1990s when NGOs, as part of the state-initiated microcredit scheme, approached rural women with loan offers (Darjeeling LaDenla Road Prerana 2003a, 2003b). In the 1990s a regional NGO started organizing women into self-help groups to familiarize them with microcredit, which they could obtain using the women's group as collateral. However, the social relationships that sustained their earlier economic activities came under severe strain as their engagement with microcredit increased in the mid-1990s. These changes impacted the women and their relationships with others in the community, engendering their performance as entrepreneurs in front of interlocutors like family, me, community and cooperative members.

3. Entrepreneurial performances and household politics of organic farmers

A real driver for the situated performances of women organic tea farmers as entrepreneurs is the lack of an organic product market in Darjeeling and its neighboring areas. To keep their farms chemical free and to keep certification as organic farmers, other farm produce would suffer. Their tomatoes, *dalle* chilli, green *saag* etc. were considerably less appealing in appearance and smaller than other vegetables pouring into town. Women organic farmers often had to make strategic connections in local schools and hostels to supply in bulk, but competition in town remains stiff. During my many stints of fieldwork I was also recruited into their marketing operations in the local *bazaar*; made to talk to local customers about the quality of their vegetables like an agricultural expert. The fact that I could fluently explain things in Nepali and had a connection to the US made it convenient for local customers to understand whatever little I had to say. Open market sales were challenging because no one was willing to pay extra for items that looked considerably different than "normal produce." Women needed to spend more time in town, and in banks, which caused strain in household relations.

While Sikkim (Darjeeling's neighboring state), and Uttarakhand in the western Himalayas tout themselves as organic states, small farmers practicing organics in the Darjeeling hills continue to languish due to the lack of a local organic market. The paucity of year-round sales for organic produce puts huge pressure on household relationships. Village (*basti*) women in Darjeeling (unlike plantation wage laborers) are also seen as housewives despite farming year-round. Symbolic practices of upward mobility and land ownership have made village (or *basti*) families take great pride in keeping their household women at home. These gendered practices clashed with the entrepreneurial ambitions of women organic farmers who wanted to run their own business (*thulo yojana*) and took micro-loans to meet household needs, which they claimed put them at *riks* because of pre-existing vectors of shame.

Household relations were affected by the amplified visibility of Women's Wing members and their business plan that went against their dominant image as housewives. Tension was particularly strong in the homes of women tea farmers who were active Women's Wing members and were going to town to sell produce for the Women's Wing's business.

In the cooperative, the women's image as housewives had naturalized "home" as the sphere of work for women. Women tea farmers faced problems because of their active participation in the Fair Trade activities of the cooperative, such as organic internal control training and Fair Trade awareness campaigns. While family members did not object to women taking out loans, they complained if women went for too many meetings, even if they were paid by the cooperative for their time and labor. The differential politics of class related to women's visibility in the public sphere affected gendered work struggles within and outside the household.

Another notable fact in household relations in the cooperative was the effect of socio-economic inequality among cooperative members and the way it affected women's position within households. Gendered mobility politics worked through household politics. Women in the cooperative area had different backgrounds depending on their socio-economic position. While caste was an important marker of identity in Darjeeling, socio-economic inequality was an important factor in shaping people's identity. The cooperative neighborhoods had a majority of Rai, Tamang, and Chettri Nepali ethnic groups. Economic inequities were based on education, family wealth, access to political power, government employment (whether in the army or local government offices), and size of landholdings.

Active Women's Wing members who regularly came to meetings, were comparatively less wealthy than women who were interested in loans but never came to the meetings. I also observed that husbands of women who were active in the Women's Wing mostly worked as wage laborers in town or farmed at home. Women whose husbands had gainful employment, large holdings of land, or successful business ventures apart from selling tea in the cooperative were more apprehensive about participating in the meetings. The latter were also not ashamed when they defaulted on micro-credit loan repayments.

For instance, Ashika, the wife of a shopkeeper and middleman in the cooperative area, was no longer a Women's Wing member. I knew from my interactions with other senior Women's Wing members that she had been a very active member in the initial years and also took out loans. After a while her husband's shop started doing really well and she left Women's Wing. When I asked Ashika to describe her experience in the Women's Wing she stated the following:

> When the Women's Wing started out we were encouraged to do *social* [emphasis mine] things. We campaigned in the villages against alcoholism, encouraged pregnant women to go to the hospitals, campaigned for polio awareness among new mothers and did ICDS child development work.[4] We did a lot of good work. But today the Women's Wing is only interested in loans; women have become very money minded and that is why their household members object to their activities.

It was ironic that Ashika ran her husband's shop when he was not in the village. The shop was in their house. She would switch on her TV and sit in the shop the entire day. She nevertheless blamed Women's Wing members for household conflicts and their "money minded" attitude. She repeated what many older men and middlemen said when asked about their thoughts on the Women's Wing. One of the male cooperative members told me that business was not a woman's thing; that is why it is bound to fail.

The active members of the Women's Wing mostly came from households with smaller land-holdings, or households that did not have enough tea bushes and felt the need to generate income from other sources. These women were interested in taking loans and usually returned them to ensure that they could take more loans each year. Women from neighborhoods which were not near the passable road that ran through the cooperative area became most active in the matters of the Women's Wing because they were exploited more by middlemen. At times there were exceptions—women from supportive wealthy homes who could spare some time from agricultural or other household chores were also active. As it occurs in any organization, some women were more articulate than others, and this was not necessarily tied to education or wealth.

Before the later establishment of Makhmali when I asked women tea farmers why they joined Women's Wing, most women frankly admitted that they had wanted to access loans. When I asked why they stayed on in Women's Wing, women explained that they now felt a sense of camaraderie, while also admitting the possibility of taking part in its future income generation schemes. The most common response was, "We love the fact that at least once a month we can forget about our homes; now we know people on both sides of the hill. We learn so many new things, get training." During interviews, many women mentioned that they became members so that their daughters could learn new things and eventually business skills. One often repeated explanation was, "Times are changing, and women need to learn new skills to keep up. I hope my daughter will also join when she is older so that she can go for different training camps organized by the NGO." Non-members or ex-members usually said they liked the Women's Wing but did not have time, very similar to responses of women who had left Women's Wing. Another important observation was that single women who got married to better (well-to-do) homes left the Women's Wing, even if they were active before marriage. Age was important, but economic inequities outweighed age in determining spontaneity of women's involvement in the Women's Wing. Eventually the Women's Wing dissolved as the relationship with the tea cooperative (SKS) soured and women did not want to take bank loans and instead practiced inter-lending from their pooled bank savings.

These differences between women of class and ambition also affected household relationships. During my fieldwork I lived for weeks in different households to see how socio-economic differences influenced household relations. Economic difference affected the way men and women were socially evaluated in their communities, which in turn affected their household relations. For instance, in one wealthy household, the daughters-in-law Poonam and Rajni were never allowed by their mother-in-law to become members of the Women's Wing. In my conversations with the mother-in-law, who was never a member of Women's Wing herself, she told me that her daughters-in-law did not need loans, and they would rather spend that time doing household chores. "Our family's daughter-in-laws do not need loans. There is much to do at home."

Eventually the youngest daughter-in-law, Poonam, decided to become a member of the Women's Wing. She was the more outspoken of the two daughters-in-law. Her husband did not have regular employment, and she decided that she needed to make some savings for the future and for her daughter. Poonam's decision was not welcomed in the household; her husband was also indifferent. There were arguments over her audacity. Poonam's father-in-law frequently joked about the failure of the Women's Wing's milk business and ineffectiveness at dinner

[4] One of the earliest gender and development programs that women in *Sanu Krishak Sanstha* took part in was the Government of India's Integrated Child Development Program (ICDS), also called *anganwadi* in other places in India.

time to dissuade Poonam from joining. Poonam's father-in-law had five acres (2 ha) of land, almost three times the average holding size in the area. He was also a loyal supplier of one of the middlemen from this region.

Poonam's father-in-law, like many other wealthy families, had a material interest in defaming the Women's Wing because he wanted his individual milk business to survive. Jokes about Women's Wing's business ventures were common in wealthy families. Sometimes, even women who had benefited from Women's Wing micro-credit schemes earlier and now had more stable income sources denigrated women Women's Wing members as "*bāthi*," (street smart) implying that active Women's Wing members had transgressed the boundaries of existing social norms in the *basti* (non-plantation village area). These rumors of failure were damaging for the confidence of Women's Wing members and their family members who were already doubtful about their daughters' or wives' new ventures.

Poonam's family was not the only one with this problem. Women from families with sufficient income were always reluctant to allow their women outside the homes. In contrast, women who felt the need to increase their income would be most active in the Women's Wing so that they could take more loans. They would be regular attendees at meetings and would pay their dues regularly when taking out bank loans. These women are now part of the independent women's group Makhmali.

4. Women substantiating entrepreneurial success

I was awakened from my sleep on 12 January, 2006 by a loud altercation between Manju and her brothers. Manju was the most active Women's Wing member of her neighborhood. She was in charge of helping the milk business along with Dipika. The night before, she had come to know that Kabita, another Women's Wing member who took the milk collected in the village (by Manju and Dipika) to Darjeeling town, had threatened the Women's Wing with starting her own business. Kabita was upset when she was asked by Women's Wing members to give another economically struggling woman a chance to go to town and learn how to sell milk and vegetables.

Manju was extremely upset because she thought Kabita was betraying the Women's Wing's objective of maintaining a rotating collective business. Kabita, it seemed, was very upset that she would lose her turn to take the milk to town eight months after she took charge of the Women's Wing's business.[5] Kabita believed that not everyone should get a turn since her economic condition was not good. The rotation system was institutionalized by the Women's Wing so that every economically struggling woman in Women's Wing would get a chance to learn business skills. So, when Kabita was asked by other Women's Wing members to give up her position, she took it personally. Manju's anger at this incident was compounded by her brother's comments. When I lay awake in my bed, I heard her elder brother Dipesh saying sarcastically:

> You should not feel frustrated now; I had warned you before that Kabita will take advantage of you. It was the Women's Wing's aim to make sure that women stand on their own feet; well at least one of them has. You should be satisfied and Women's Wing should also stop this business since it is not working out. If you cannot digest this reality you all are not fit to do business. That is why the cooperative is not giving Women's Wing Fair Trade money this year.

Manju's brothers and their friends in the locality were otherwise very supportive of the Women's Wing's business and helped them with their accounts. I had seen them defending their sisters when people made fun of their business plan. Manju's brother also used the money Manju borrowed from the micro-credit loans. They nevertheless made fun of Manju because she was spending a lot of time outside the house going to meetings, going to the town and visiting peoples' homes campaigning to give their milk to the Women's Wing business. Manju and Dipika would hold meetings in the village to make sure that villagers gave their milk to Women's Wing and not the middlemen who mixed water after buying milk from villagers and sold it in town at double the price. Manju snapped back:

[5] The Women's Wing had decided that the person who took the milk to town would get a share of the profits from the milk sales as her daily salary. The same person would not take the milk to town for more than three months in a row to ensure that everyone, depending on their need, would be able to earn from the collective business.

> Don't talk to me like that. The next time you are upset because the middleman cheated you with your goats, I will remind you about your failures. It is common for beginners to make mistakes in business, but we want to do *swaccha vyāpar* (clean/fair trade). You must understand that Women's Wing does not want to be like middlemen; we want profit but not by exploiting others. So try to understand what Women's Wing is trying to do. Do you stop taking your goats to town during *Dashāi* (annual festival) because you were cheated by one middleman last year? Why do you want us to stop? I think you are paying too much attention to village rumors. Try to apply your brain and see what the Women's Wing is trying to do. And where would you get money to buy the goats if I was not a Women's Wing member?

The exchange between Manju and her brother typified interactions between active Women's Wing members and their families, while they tried to substantiate their entrepreneurial selves. Women informants in the cooperative community commented that they do not go to town regularly and face opposition in their homes if they spend a long time outside them. I asked all women I interviewed whether they needed to get permission if they were going to go to meetings; most of them said yes. Women's work inside the home was considered materially and symbolically important to maintain inter-household distinctions within the village.

Manju's altercation with her brother was underlined by socio-economic issues. Manju's family was sufficiently well-to-do. She lived with her aged father and two elder brothers. She had a sister who was married. They had a large land holding, but tea was not the main produce of the family. Manju took out loans and gave money to her brothers for buying young goats for their animal husbandry business. She also ran a small shop from her house selling cigarettes, soap, and biscuits. She told me that she paid back her loans from the earnings of this small shop but her brothers also gave back a large share from the sale of their goats and ginger during the season. Because Manju's family was comparatively wealthy her brothers frequently asked her to give up her Women's Wing work. The standard discourse was, "You don't need to." As stated earlier, restricting movement is a socioeconomic issue, and upwardly mobile families are especially conscious of the movement of their women outside the household.

Men were also very self-conscious if their wives or sisters were working outside the home. While I was staying at Kabita's house, her husband, Harka Bahadur often asked me, especially if he had had too much *raksi* (rice wine) to drink, what I thought about their household situation. In the beginning I did not understand what he meant by "household situation." Gradually, I mastered village gossip; I understood his self-consciousness and concern about the reputation of his household. I continued pretending not to understand, and finally he elaborated, "You know Kabita goes out in the morning to the market and I stay at home. Do you think that is okay? How do you feel about that?" I told him that to me it was normal. He should not feel bad about it because Kabita was earning for him and their two sons. My participant observation in the *jungās* (village vehicles) while traveling back and forth from the town also helped me to triangulate these frustrations among men, whose wives were active Women's Wing members.

Kabita and Harka Bahadur were looked down upon because apparently they had violent fights at home. According to male cooperative members, Harka Bahadur drank too much. Kabita was seen as cunning because she went to town often and was not afraid to argue with male members of the community. Even her closest neighbors looked down upon her. She also had a smaller agricultural plot and her household output of organic tea was little, so she had much less income compared to households with large holdings.

Harka Bahadur knew that people talked badly about his wife. But there was nothing he could do. Kabita was smart, she could sell things in town, and the two did not have enough tea bushes to just rely on tea. Harka Bahadur also helped his wife, collecting vegetables from the village and packing them in a bag in the wee hours of the morning, cooking for her sons and taking care of their small plot of land. Harka Bahadur had failed to secure regular waged work in town. When I stayed with Harka Bahadur and Kabita, he used to call his female cousin to make lunch for me in Kabita's absence because women serving food to a guest was the norm. I always requested him to let me cook my own food, which he appreciated. This saved him from being ashamed about his wife not serving his guests.

Household conflicts were not just interactions between spouses; conversations within the household were often influenced by rumors in the cooperative community and actions of the cooperative board. Harka Bahadur was sidelined in the cooperative because he drank too much, had little education, and also because his wife had a bad reputation as being cunning. On the other hand Hiren, the secretary of the cooperative was also very cunning, but he was not ostracized like Harka Bahadur. His wife had no reputation and was not a member of Women's Wing. He was educated. He probably did not drink as much as Harka Bahadur. He also had a job at a government school. Because of his class position people did not speak badly of him. However, he was criticized heavily by Women's Wing members because he played an active part in the cooperative's decision to not share the FLO premium with the Women's Wing.

People did not speak well about Punita, another active Women's Wing member. She was also nearing thirty and was not married, which was a major cause for gossip. Punita was very independent-minded and had a very sharp tongue, but people also talked about her because she was an active member of the Women's Wing. Punita's family had little land. Her parents farmed, and each year her brother tried to get into the Indian army. Even her brother was uncomfortable that she was still not married, and reminded her occasionally that he would not get a wife if she did not marry. Punita had told me numerous times that these comments in her household did not bother her anymore. She would not marry because she loved watching TV in the afternoons between her farming work and was concerned that her future husband might not let her. Women's Wing members who were single were very apprehensive of marrying men from the neighborhood, for the fear of being subject to the norms of being a "housewife."

These kinds of wealth and gender inequalities were regular in the cooperative area. Well-to-do men and their wives always maintained composure, but community members constantly scrutinized economically struggling families. Gender ideologies survived through these gendered discourses about men, women, and their households. Women's reputations affected their husband's participation in the cooperative and their own household relations. These gendered politics were challenged by women tea farmers in the cooperative. Women plantation workers on the other hand are not able to challenge the domination of the management (and male co-workers) even in spite of greater freedom to meet outside the house.

5. Household relations and discourses of "risk"

It was because of this gendered class politics that active Women's Wing members felt vulnerable and decided to quit Women's Wing. They blamed this not only on their husbands and family members, but also on the cooperative and community who held on to gender ideologies about women's work. A recurring theme in womens' narratives was a discussion of risk. The *"riks"* theme of was a way for women to talk about the gendered struggles they continued to face in their community and their households. They found a way to connect their past sacrifices in keeping organic farming alive (before the cooperative was formed) with the present ones to justify their entrepreneurialism and activism within the cooperative.

At the time of my research, women thought that their biggest risk came from male middlemen who dominated the trade in produce and milk from the cooperative villages, and were related to their families. Some of the important members of the cooperative were middlemen, who collected vegetables and produce from the neighborhoods at very low prices and sold them in town for profit (Sen 2017). Since their families had depended on middlemen for many years, women were having a hard time convincing their family members about their business venture. This risk was compounded when their family members did not realize or object to the extent of middlemen's exploitation of villagers (like Manju's brothers). Some women told me that they had always been forced to take more risk for their families and communities without much support. By "*riks*", women not only implied greater workload but also the increased possibility of losing their reputations, especially if they were poor and became active in the Women's Wing.

After the run-in that the Women's Wing had with the cooperative over the sharing of FLO money for their business plan, powerful men in the village spread rumors that the Women's Wing business was bound to fail because women were inexperienced. Poonam's father-in-law is one such man. *Goālās* (milkmen) even discovered the milk depot in town to which the Women's Wing was selling their milk. The *goālās* told the depot owner that women were disorganized and unethical. Women tea farmers now constantly felt they were at risk because their

reputations were at stake. Their own family members at times felt the pressure of being loyal to some middlemen who were questioning women's' skills. This created household anxiety. However, if women tea farmers succumbed to these rumors and stopped their business, they would risk losing their chance to convince villagers that they were successful businesspeople. Their failure would ensure that the cooperative never gave them FLO money for their projects.

In the December 2006 Women's Wing meeting, the driver of the car that carried the Women's Wing-procured milk to town was called to a meeting to settle accounts. He never arrived with his car at the designated time to take the Women's Wing produce and milk to town. This was a major issue because of the perishability of milk and vegetables. Though he was very helpful to the Women's Wing's business, his immediate public response was to hide his delay. The car owner quickly added: "You women are blaming me for your business not doing well but you all do not even know how to talk to the milk depot owner in town. If you knew that then your business would have been running smoothly." The comment implied that village women were inexperienced in business dealings. At this Manju quickly responded,

> Thanks so much for taking time out to come here and for helping us to realize our mistakes. However, it is also my duty to remind all you people from this neighborhood that no milkman was offering you Rs.8 (US$0.11) per liter of milk before we started this business. We don't have a pliable road, so please remember the days when you had to throw away your extra milk in frustration for not getting a good price from the middlemen in other villages. None of you encouraged your *household members to start a business* [emphasis mine]. Now that we are doing well, you tell our brothers and fathers that Women's Wing members have become *bāthi*. We took a great risk by starting this business so that you all did not have to waste your milk and we women could also learn how to do organized business. We shell out our own money when the customers in the town delay their payments, just to make sure that our business is fair, and that you are getting your money on time. Please have some appreciation for the risk that we are taking here. We are here to learn, so let us have some productive discussion about how we can sell your milk more efficiently, instead of trying to create problems in our homes.

Reminders of risk-taking for the community were regular in meetings and in my personal conversations with women. Manju frequently reminded her brother about the efforts of the Women's Wing to do *swaccha vyāpār* (clean/fair trade). Women told me that the cooperative was a microcosm of society where women's work outside their family farms was criticized. The conflicts they faced in the household were compounded by the attitude of comparatively wealthy board members and their wives.

On 16th March, 2007 there was a general strike in Darjeeling called by the Gorkha National Liberation Front, a political group demanding a separate state. On the day of the strike women risked going to town to sell their milk. I met them in town and waited with them beside the train station. I listened quietly to their conversation, which again centered on the topic of risk. In spite of the strike, women tea farmers risked coming to town because they wanted to capture the market there. They wanted potential customers to feel that they were serious about the business. There were no cars running in Darjeeling that day. All schools were shuttered and all shops were closed. During such strikes, the government allowed only emergency service vehicles to drive on the road, which included emergency food supplies like milk. So the women made their own "emergency milk duty" poster and convinced the driver to take them to town. Apparently, all the other male milk vendors from hamlets within the cooperative and the driver were hesitant to travel to town. The men were not sure about the circumstances in town. They feared they would get caught by the police and would have to pay bribes to them. The Women's Wing members said that their driver agreed to take them because they agreed to compensate any monetary loss.

Binu told me later, "There are lots of men who come regularly to town and know what a strike entails, but none would come for the fear of being caught. It was because the women took the monetary risk that the men could all sell their milk. Women are always asked for more sacrifices in the home and community; yet there is no faith in their capacity to do big business." She felt pride and frustration at the same time. She was proud because they were able to sell their milk and frustrated because whenever the women's group decided to start a new business

venture their integrity and capacity was questioned. Men mobilized existing gender ideologies in the community to express doubt about whether simple village women would be able to conduct big business like men. Poonam's father-in-law kept telling her that joining Women's Wing was a waste of time because their business was a failure. Manju's brothers made fun of her when she spent time at Women's Wing. Binu told me that men, who perceive women as potential competitors, use these statements to show concern. In reality, such comments are meant to create a lack of confidence about the Women's Wing's business. Once the women got their share of the FLO money, such concern had quickly turned into hostility. Active Women's Wing women were now defamed with negative representations like "*bāthi* and *chuchchi*[6]", which made their household relations tense.

Women farmers never interfered with the business of the middlemen who were friends of their male family members or their kin. Wealthy middlemen were active in the cooperative too. They had more land and kept very good relations with families who were well off. Class relations in the village worked through these inter-household ties. Women felt frustrated when these men defamed Women's Wing members. Women's Wing members who were engaged in small entrepreneurial activities felt that they had taken all kinds of risk in their community, from selling illegal tea to taking out micro-credit loans to support their families, and now in this business, which the male middlemen were out to destroy. They were willing to take risks for the men, such as on the day of the strike. Such compassion could not be expected from the men. Women told me that they took risks but never let their temper overtake their diplomacy. They understood mens' motives but never got into any kind of altercation with them because it went against notions of honor. Whenever they felt cornered, they found friendly ways to get their point across. In such a circumstance, women felt that they could not let their group dissolve. It was through this group that women could critique male dominance and the use of their labor. The hope was that the group's continuation and success would convince their household members that they were onto something important. It would convince family members that their wives, daughters and sisters were trying to accomplish something important for their household and community by trying to raise household earnings by cutting out the middlemen.

When women took loans, they felt that they took a risk for various reasons. Their husbands and other family members used this money for themselves, but the responsibility of returning the money fell on the women. Since the Women's Wing women had been taking out loans for the last seven years, they felt that they were being exposed to the risk of running their homes all alone. Manju had once told me,

> Men just go out, earn a little bit of money and think that they are the ones running the household for which their wives should be grateful to them. The truth is that wives run the household, they stretch that little amount of money and make things look okay. It is because of the effort of the women that their husbands can feel a sense of pride which is highly misplaced!

Sunita *didi,* another committed Women's Wing member, once told me "The work inside the home is rarely seen, that is the nature of our work!" After my extended interview, I realized that by "work inside the home" she meant not only physical household labor, but the difficult process of negotiating identity and acceptance within the household. Women whose families owned cattle had a common joke, "We get the grass, he takes the milk", to describe the inequality in resource sharing within cooperative households. Women spent a lot of time cutting grass for their cattle and most of them hated this work. This comment implied how men enjoyed the fruits of women's labor.

Women tea farmers also used Fair Trade trainings and public events to address household issues. During the Fair Trade *Janajāgaran Kāryakram* a People's Awareness Campaign, Women's Wing members made speeches about the significance of Fair Trade and urged people to remember why they were getting development money from Fair Trade (Sen 2017). Somewhere in these speeches Women's Wing members always mentioned that they were also trying to practice Fair Trade (*swaccha vyāpār*). Sabita mentioned, "When all of you trust and respect the Women's Wing and value it as much as the cooperative then our community will see true Fair Trade happen. Every household member should send all their women to the Women's Wing so that they can all learn business skills so

[6] Nepali derogatory terms for implying that women were street-smart and had a sharp tongue.

vital in today's world. Don't make fun of your wives if they spend time in meetings; don't make their lives difficult." I had recorded many public speeches that women made in the cooperative in which they made these moral appeals to the cooperative community to pay attention to how women were treated in their homes. In this particular speech Sabita talked of women's household relations and Fair Trade.

Gendered resource politics was thus compounded by economic hierarchies making economically struggling families and their women more vulnerable to the effects of inequality. Manju, Sunita, Kabita, Binu, and Punita had various economic disadvantages. Manju faced great opposition in her family, because her brothers thought she did not need to take loans. When Manju's family did not need loans, she took it in her name and gave them to other women in the village who had not become Women's Wing members. Sunita complained that her husband was given a hard time in the community after the Women's Wing floated their business plan. Comparatively wealthy women also deplored Women's Wing members, saying that they were money-minded. As I detailed earlier, the wife of a wealthy shopkeeper in one community who was previously involved with the Women's Wing told me, "These days women are just interested in loans, in our days we were doing social things. We were not business minded." When the Women's Wing started they were not involved in micro-credit but did health campaigns and campaigns against alcoholism, which were common programs run by the Indian government (see Sharma 2008). When micro-credit began, everyone welcomed loans and the only way to get one was by making their daughters, wives, or mothers members of Women's Wing. Some women dropped out a couple of years later, mostly because they had defaulted or their families now made enough money from selling tea. By this time, the local *panchayats* also started lending money to people in the locality. These wealthy ex-Women's Wing members were the most critical of the present Women's Wing members, implying that it was not appropriate for women to be interested in business. These women spoiled the reputation of Women's Wing's present members through village gossip.

In their monthly meetings women often spoke of solving the "household problem." In the January meeting, Punita raised her hand when the Women's Wing president was deciding on the meeting agenda. She said that women had to take greater risk, and the fault lay with the Women's Wing members. She requested women not to be dumb (*lāti*). She urged them to go home and convince their household members that business was not a bad thing. It was all for the community. Premlila, another Women's Wing member, mentioned that "Many of our community's problems were because of household issues."

Some women farmers identified that *riks* was systemic due to the barriers to women's economic freedom, as Nita explains:

> You know how these NGO brothers talk about *riks* to us, they tell us we should pay up on time and not being able to do so will harm our future loan-taking ability. I say we are the ones who really understand *riks,* we have to return the money, it is us women; we have always taken *riks* for our community.

Women used the word *riks* creatively to draw attention to inequities, some of which have escalated along with new economic opportunities. In their daily discourse, loan-taking women identified several aspects to the notion of *riks.* Sheila reminded me that: "we frequently have to take risks; now the task of household procurement (*sakaune kaam*) has become risky." Instances like this were noted in regular conversation where women invoked the notion of *riks*.

Through their various acts of cultural entrepreneurialism (along with taking economic and cultural risks) women tea farmers tried to show how male power worked through the linkages between community and household relations. By publicly talking about the "household problem" during Fair Trade trainings, women exposed their household anxieties.

6. Conclusion

In assessing the success of alternative/organic agricultural practices in "certified communities" one must take into account the intense community level performances and practice that relate to, but go beyond, agriculture. Such attention demands that we widen our aperture when "seeing" women farmers and realize the pressures they

face in doing the labor of organics and Fair Trade. This includes their work in producing organic tea, hours spent in training to pass certification of internal control measures, attending Fair Trade training, and taking cultural and financial risks to become entrepreneurs. In a situation of intense precarity where sales of green organic tea leaves to plantations only brings income for seven or eight months a year, these community level performances and entrepreneurialism are a way for women farmers to make visible the labor that goes into sustaining their households – while continuing their commitment to organics and building economic resilience for their families.

These performances at the community level in order to gain respect as female entrepreneurs, as well as for the transnational audience waiting to bring them into the folds of global regulatory regimes, remind us that the path of sustainable agriculture requires this "dual enactment" of performance work to thrive. While transnational justice and sustainability regimes want to empower women farmers, this "dual enactment" of performance remains concealed. Political ecologists have been engaging critically with new environmental and social justice formations (Brown 2013; Sen and Majumder 2011; West 2012) and some have examined the specifics of "third world environmental justice" (Schroeder *et al.* 2008). Taking heed from this and staying with the concerns of feminist political ecologists with gendered resource access and use (Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997), I have underscored how understanding the path to agricultural sustainability in the Global South depends on a broader examination of development trajectories, gendered economic ambition (in this case entrepreneurial ambition), and development-related aspiration at the grassroots (Chari 2004; Klenk 2004; Majumder 2018; Ramamurthy 2003, 2010) leading to situated community level performances. To genuinely reward and empower *fempreneurs*, this complexity needs to be addressed, instead of celebrating the "indigenous" tea farming knowledge of Darjeeling's women producers.

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