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GENDERED IMPACTS OF LAND COMMERCIALIZATION IN CAMBODIA

Introduction

Studies from diverse contexts tell us that land commercialization aggravates gender inequality by adversely impacting poor women's access to land, natural resources, and food. Land commercialization in Cambodia has advanced at an unfettered pace since the country's transition to free-market capitalism in the early 1990s. Looking at women's experiences helps us see that the social, political and livelihood changes triggered by land commercialization are mediated by gendered hierarchies, which often remain unaccounted for in land reform and agricultural development policies.

This research brief discusses gendered impacts of land commercialization in Cambodia with regard to four inter-linked areas: changes in women's access to land, gendered loss of the commons, transformed gender divisions of labour, and violence against women.

Land commercialization in Cambodia: policies, politics and local processes

Land commercialization refers to the increasing commercial pressure on agricultural and forest land arising from multiple sources such as transnational or domestic investors, migrants and governments. The resulting commodification of land affects processes of agrarian transition, food security outcomes and social relations. Due to existing inequalities in access to land, capital, social and political status, women and men experience the process of land commercialization and agrarian transition differently.

In Cambodia, land commercialization occurs at two levels: a) from above due to the neoliberal 'development' policies and patronage-based politics, and b) from below due to the expansion of the rural labour force and increasing small-holder migration from densely populated areas in the lowlands to land abundant areas in the north-east and north-west of the country.

Key Messages

Land commercialization in Cambodia is occurring due to a combination of large-scale and small-scale pressures on land. Some factors that contribute to land commercialization include neoliberal development policies, patronage-based governance, increased population growth, and rural to rural migration to areas that are perceived to have an abundance of land.

Women's access to land: As a result of the uneven distribution of land titles, the proposed benefits of joint titling promised under the 2001 Land Law have not been realized. Moreover, linking access to property to conjugal status may exacerbate gendered insecurities.

Women's access to the commons: The loss of forest resources due to land concessions, illegal logging and increased in-migration has resulted in loss of food, livelihood and income for rural households. For women, who are traditionally responsible for food preparation, this has meant an increasing dependency on markets for food provision which in certain cases results in reduced accessibility.

Gender division of labour: Economic land concessions have generated few to no job opportunities for local women. Due to their domestic responsibilities, women are paid less and have access to fewer jobs in the rural wage labour market.

Violence against women: There is an increase in incidents of violence against women in households affected by land conflicts. Women land activists that defend their households' and communities' rights to land and housing are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse.

In the early 1990s, the government revived the policy of granting land concessions to private actors on state-held land, a practice first initiated during the French protectorate in the early 20th century. It subsequently transferred more than half of the country's forest resources to private companies under forestry concessions for timber export, alongside agricultural concessions for commercial crops like cassava, rubber and palm oil. The 2001 Land Law introduced the economic land concessions (ELC) policy, allowing the transfer of up to 10,000 hectares to private actors for agro-industrial development. The ELC scheme was tied to national development goals, which favoured an export-oriented agricultural sector and championed private investment in rural areas as an 'engine for economic growth' (Royal Government of Cambodia 2014). The lack of transparency in the allotment of ELCs, alongside the large number of high-ranking officials and ruling party members embroiled in conflicts over land with local residents, reinforces the view that land concessions served as instruments of state patronage. By 2012, ELCs were granted on more than half the arable land in the country.

The growing pressure on land in rural Cambodia is also related to rising small-scale demand, reflected in high levels of migration in the countryside. In 2013, rural-to-rural migration accounted for 58.4 percent of the total share of migration, in contrast to rural-to-urban migration, which made up only 24.5 percent (National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning 2013, viii). Our field research and secondary literature indicate that the promise of profits from industrial crops drives migration into rural communities resulting in land commercialization and a loss farm and forest lands for native populations, particularly in areas dominated by indigenous minorities. In Ratanakiri province for instance, where until the 1990s indigenous groups practiced swidden agriculture, the price of land grew exponentially as rubber prices spiked in 2005, causing a major shift in land use and forest cover.

Women's access to land

The 2001 Land Law allowed for joint titling for women and men, thus providing an important opportunity for ensuring gender equity. According to the Cambodia Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, as of 2014, spouses jointly held 63 percent of the land titles issued in the country (Beban and Pou 2014, 39). Data also indicates that 85 percent of the land registered in Cambodia belongs jointly or fully to a woman as of September 2013 (Young Park 2015).

However, it is important to note that land titles have not reached a majority of Cambodia's rural population, particularly in areas that are historically tenure insecure and have been targeted for land concessions. Spatial mapping of land titling programmes and land concessions indicates that systematic titling was avoided in areas where a majority of ELCs were granted, such as the north-eastern provinces inhabited largely by indigenous groups and the south-west region of the county (Dwyer 2015). Thus women and men who farmed on land that was likely to overlap with ELCs, not only did not receive land titles but also lost access to large swathes of forest land, which were an important source of non-farm income and food security.

In addition, linking land titles to marital status limits the

emancipatory effects of joint titling for women for two reasons. First, registering a marriage or divorce with local authorities is uncommon among rural households. As a result, when couples separate, joint titles may impose an additional complication and in some cases tenure insecurity since changing legal documentation of ownership is often too costly and tedious for poor households. Second, while local authorities tend to acknowledge de facto marriages, they typically do not do the same for separations. Thus, when women did not want their former partners' names included on the land titles, local authorities nevertheless sometimes pressured them to do so (Baaz, Lilja, and Östlund 2017). Under customary law, Cambodian women have the right to inherit property and withhold it after divorce. However, due to the problems associated with the official recognition of marriages and divorce, linking titles to marital status may augment women's land insecurity.

Data and methodology

This research brief draws on qualitative interviews in Ratanakiri and Kratié provinces and structured questionnaires administered at the households level in three Cambodian provinces, Ratanakiri, Kratié and Kampong Thom. The interviews cited were conducted by the author with the assistance of translators in Khmer, Jarai and Tampuan languages over multiple field visits in 2015 and 2016. These interviews were subsequently transcribed, coded and analyzed using Nvivo.



Map of Cambodia - Source: Author, Wikipedia

In our study areas, women mentioned that a major benefit from holding land titles was using them as collaterals to access micro-finance loans for purposes such as buying food or inputs for farming. However, some respondents also pointed to increased incidents of landlessness in their community resulting from loan defaults, suggesting that in certain cases using land titles as collaterals for loans may fuel cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

Land commercialization and gendered loss of the commons

Under Cambodia's 2002 Forest Law, rural communities can use and manage forests as community forestries. However, there has been a dramatic reduction in communal forest lands as a result

of land and forest concessions, with important impacts on rural households. With reduced access to food and incomes from forestry and natural resources, households have had to increasingly rely on wage income. However, income from forests continues to provide up to 30 percent of rural households' total revenue even in concession areas and is particularly relevant for women, as they are less likely to find non-farm jobs (Jiao, Smith-Hall, and Theilade 2015, 322–24).

Among indigenous communities in Ratanakiri, women are traditionally responsible for gathering forest products for household consumption. However, with increased clearing of forested lands the distances between forests and villages have become longer, and there is less access to food and to wood for fuel. In our study areas in Ratanakiri, women complained that they could no longer go to the forests regularly because the forests close to the villages had been cleared by migrants and domestic investors. In order to reach the forests today, they would need access to the household motorcycles, but these were being used by the men. In Kampong Thom, the combined pressure of migrants from lowland areas and ELCs has similarly resulted in the disappearance of forests, which has altered households' self-supporting access to food. Women as food providers are now dependent on markets to fulfil their households' dietary needs. In periods of cash shortage, women and elderly persons that are unable to earn wages may be seen as economic burdens on households (Reysoo and Suon, 2017).

As a result of the commercialization of land, community forestries are constantly under threat from illegal loggers and encroachment by migrant households. In our study areas in Kratié, a young woman who works as a forest ranger for her village community forestry told us that every two weeks the rangers spot illegal logging or encroachment into the neighbouring forest. Women are the main users of the community forest collecting non-timber forest products, particularly mushrooms and vegetables for consumption. A group of women in the same village also mentioned that they use the community forest for collecting small pieces of wood for charcoal production, which they can sell at their local market. Due to their care responsibilities, many women are unable to participate in wage labour activities outside their villages; however, the community forest allows them to collect food products that earn them an income and contribute to their households' food security.

Land commercialization and gender division of labour

Although one of the government's objectives in granting ELCs was to increase jobs in rural areas, we found very little job creation, particularly for women. Other studies have also indicated that in large-scale agricultural investments in South-East Asia, including Cambodia, women held the worst paid and least secure jobs (Zhan, Mirza, and Speller 2015, 9). Replacing incomes from forestry and agriculture may be particularly difficult for women given unequal access to education, gender differentiated reproductive and care obligations, and exclusions from labour markets based on gendered ideologies. Household surveys in our study areas, most of which were affected by land concessions, found that women had less access to jobs and lower average incomes. In Ratanakiri and Kratié, the gaps between women's and men's wages and

participation were particularly pronounced. Our qualitative interviews at the household level indicate that women's care and reproductive responsibilities are the key factors limiting women's participation in non-farm employment.

In Cambodia, as in other contexts, education levels have an important impact on non-farm incomes. Higher education levels of the household heads and members tend to result in larger shares of income from non-farm activities and self-employment. Conversely those with less education, disproportionately women, tend to have difficulty accessing non-farm jobs. In Ratanakiri, for instance, where land commercialization has included a sizable decrease in households' access to agricultural land and forests, our findings indicate that women's access to income-generating activities has suffered as a result of increased commercialization. During our fieldwork in Ratanakiri, we learned that women and girls were on an average less educated than men, and the gap in women's arithmetic and Khmer language skills among indigenous households was ostensible. A number of women from indigenous households did not feel comfortable speaking in Khmer and when interviewed in their native language mentioned that due to their lack of education, they did not fully participate in household financial dealings such as crop and land sales.

Land commercialization, resistance and violence against women

The 2001 Land Law has been widely criticized for failing to protect the rights of small farmers and indigenous communities to their land and livelihoods. A large number of forced evictions, dispossessions and human rights violations resulting from the ELC policy have been documented. According to some estimates close to 830,000 Cambodians have been impacted by land-related conflicts between 2000-2015 (FIDH 2015).

Women have been visible advocates defending the rights of their households and communities to housing, agricultural and forest land, as members of organized resistance groups, campaigns and protests. However, one outcome of their vocal participation in resistance has been increased levels of domestic abuse and violence. A study by a Cambodian human rights organization on women land activists found that these women experienced heightened familial and conjugal tension following their involvement in campaigning and activism, including violence and family breakdown (LICADHO 2014). Women activists attributed these tensions to their involvement in meetings and campaigning, which reduced their availability for domestic activities such as cooking and cleaning, thus asserting a break from traditional domestic gender roles.

Another factor spurring violence against women has been the loss of economic stability due to land conflicts and dispossession. A survey found that there was an increase in incidents of domestic violence against women in households experiencing land conflict (Cambodian Center for Human Rights 2016). The survey also noted the immense psychological trauma endured by women victims of eviction and land conflict, with more than 35 percent of women stating that they harboured suicidal thoughts following their experiences of dispossession, eviction or land conflict.

Conclusion

Land commercialization in Cambodia is a multi-dimensional process occurring due to an increase in agro-industrial investments in land, increased speculative value of land, and internal migration. Though the gendered impact of these changes have rarely been addressed in the literature, this research brief has highlighted the specific ways in which gender plays a role in determining access to land, labour, incomes and markets. Focusing on rural women's experiences of land commercialization in Cambodia helps illuminate the ways in which gendered hierarchies are reinforced or transformed in such processes.



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Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development

In the light of the global challenges, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) launched in 2012 the joint «Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development» (r4d programme). The main goal of the r4d programme is the generation of new knowledge and the application of research results that contribute to solving global problems and securing public goods in low- and middle-income countries within the framework of global sustainable development. The r4d programme consists of six modules, five with thematic priorities and one for thematically open calls. <http://www.r4d.ch>



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