

DISCUSSION PAPER

# GENDER AND LAND DISPOSSESSION:

A Comparative Analysis



No. 15, July 2017

**MICHAEL LEVIEN**

FOR THE WORLD SURVEY ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT 2014

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# SUMMARY

This paper seeks to advance our understanding of the gendered implications of rural land dispossession. It does so through a comparative analysis of five cases of dispossession that were driven by different economic purposes in diverse agrarian contexts: the English enclosures; colonial and post-colonial rice irrigation projects in the Gambia; large dams in India; oil palm cultivation in Indonesia; and Special Economic Zones in India. The paper identifies some of the common gendered effects of land dispossession, showing in each case how this reproduced women's lack of independent land rights or reversed them where they existed, intensified household reproductive work and occurred without meaningful consultation with—much less decision-making by—rural women. The paper also demonstrates ways in which the

gendered consequences of land dispossession vary across forms of dispossession and agrarian milieu. The most important dimension of this variation is the effect of land loss on the gendered division of labour, which is often deleterious but varies qualitatively across the cases examined. In addition, the paper illustrates further variations within dispossessed populations as gender intersects with class, caste and other inequalities. It concludes that land dispossession consistently contributes to gender inequality, albeit in socially and historically specific ways. So while defensive struggles against land dispossession will not in themselves transform patriarchal social relations, they may be a pre-condition for more offensive struggles for gender equality.

# RÉSUMÉ

Ce document vise à améliorer notre compréhension des répercussions sexospécifiques de l'expropriation par le biais d'une analyse comparative de cinq cas d'expropriation rurale aux fins de la réalisation de différents objectifs économiques dans différents contextes agricoles : les « enclosures » anglaises, les projets coloniaux et post-coloniaux d'irrigation du riz en Gambie ; les grands barrages en Inde ; la culture de l'huile de palme en Indonésie ; et les zones économiques spéciales en Inde. Ce document commence par recenser certains des effets sexospécifiques les plus connus de l'expropriation. Dans chaque cas, il démontre que l'expropriation a débouché sur une carence de droits fonciers indépendants pour les femmes ou les a inversés ; qu'elle a intensifié les devoirs familiaux au sein du ménage ; et qu'elle n'a donné lieu à aucune vraie consultation avec les femmes rurales, donc à aucune prise en compte de leurs décisions. Deuxièmement, ce document

montre comment les conséquences sexospécifiques de l'expropriation varient selon les formes d'expropriation et selon le milieu agricole. La dimension la plus importante de ces variations est l'effet des expropriations sur la répartition du travail en fonction des sexes, qui est souvent délétère, mais varie qualitativement selon les cas examinés. Ce document révèle également des variantes importantes au sein des populations expropriées étant donné que la dimension genre s'ajoute aux problématiques de classe sociale, de caste et d'autres inégalités. Cet article conclue que l'expropriation contribue systématiquement aux inégalités des sexes, par le biais de modalités sociales et historiques spécifiques cependant. Ainsi, même si les luttes défensives contre l'expropriation ne permettent pas l'évolution des relations sociales patriarcales, elles seront peut-être une condition préalable à la conduite de davantage de luttes offensives en faveur de l'égalité des sexes.

# RESUMEN

Este informe tiene por objetivo mejorar nuestra comprensión de las implicaciones que tiene la expropiación de tierras desde el punto de vista del género. Lo hace a través de un análisis comparativo de cinco casos de expropiación de tierras rurales motivada por diferentes fines económicos en diversos contextos agrarios: las enseñadas inglesas; los proyectos coloniales y poscoloniales de irrigación de arroz en Gambia; las grandes presas en la India; el cultivo de aceite de palma en Indonesia; y las zonas económicas especiales en la India. En primer lugar, el informe identifica algunos de los efectos más habituales que tienen las expropiaciones sobre la cuestión del género. En cada caso se demuestra que la expropiación de tierras perpetúa la carencia de derechos independientes de las mujeres sobre las tierras, o que estos derechos se han invertido en el caso de que hayan existido; que la expropiación ha intensificado el trabajo reproductivo en el hogar; y que la expropiación se ha producido sin con las mujeres de las zonas

rurales. En segundo lugar, el informe demuestra las maneras en que las consecuencias de la expropiación de tierras sobre la cuestión del género varían entre diversas formas de expropiación y medios agrarios. La dimensión más importante de esta variación es el efecto de la pérdida de tierras sobre la división del trabajo a partir del género, que a menudo es perjudicial, pero que difiere cualitativamente entre los casos estudiados. El informe también ilustra la importante variación que se da entre las poblaciones expropiadas en la medida que el género se interseca con la clase, la casta, y otras desigualdades. El informe concluye que la expropiación de tierras contribuye sistemáticamente a la desigualdad de género, aunque de maneras específicas en los planos social e histórico. Así, si bien la lucha defensiva contra la expropiación de tierras no conllevará por sí misma una transformación de las relaciones sociales patriarcales, puede ser una condición previa para llevar a cabo luchas más decididas en pos de la igualdad de género.

# 1.

# INTRODUCTION

Rural people across the Global South are confronting increasing demands on their lands for a variety of economic purposes. Whether for Special Economic Zones (SEZs), dams, mining, industry, urban real estate or transnational agricultural investments, rural land dispossession is now a central feature of economic accumulation and political contestation in many countries. This paper seeks to advance our understanding of the gendered implications of such dispossession. It does so through a comparative analysis of five cases of rural land dispossession driven by different economic purposes in diverse socio-historical contexts.<sup>1</sup>

An adequate understanding of the implications of land dispossession, or ‘land grabbing’,<sup>2</sup> for gender and other dimensions of social inequality has never been more pressing. The fact that land grabs are now attracting unprecedented attention is no mere intellectual trend but rather a belated response to concrete political-economic forces. While different economic sectors are driving land grabs in different regions, and there is great variation in the politics surrounding them, it seems possible to say three things about land grabs at a global level. First, they

appear to be increasing. While governments do not keep track of the numbers of people they uproot from their land, and recent attempts to quantify just agricultural ‘land deals’ have been controversial,<sup>3</sup> few doubt that the neoliberal period—and perhaps particularly the first decade of the 2000s—has been accompanied by an increase in land dispossession.<sup>4</sup>

Second, in addition to increasing, land grabs are changing in character. For most of the twentieth century, the majority of ‘development-induced displacement’ in the Global South came from public sector infrastructure (e.g., dams), industry and extraction. As they have moved to economic models prioritizing growth through private investment, however, states have increasingly used their coercive powers to transfer land from farmers to private companies. In China and India, state-backed

1 For their insight and help in preparing this paper, I would like to thank Sara Berry, Melissa Leach, Shahra Razavi, Seemin Qayum, Ben White, the UN Women staff and participants in their 2014 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development workshop.

2 In what follows, I use ‘land grab’ as a lay synonym for ‘land dispossession’ and restrict both to instances in which states make people relinquish their land involuntarily. This includes instances in which people are dispossessed of landed resources they own or use irrespective of whether the land is under formal or informal tenure (including customary land and commons). It interprets any land acquisition undertaken without prior and informed consent to be involuntary, whether or not the dispossessed receive compensation. It excludes, however, incidences in which land is voluntarily sold on the market. Admittedly, the line between voluntary sale and coercion is not always clear; sales can be forced not only by States but also by decentralized or ‘intimate’ actors in ways that fall beneath the radar (Hall et al. 2011; Hall 2012; Li 2014). While blurred at their edges, these categories are nevertheless important for distinguishing between the large number of cases that clearly involve coercive dispossession (often exercised through ‘eminent domain’) and those that involve willing sellers on the market. This definition corresponds with how most policymakers and scholars have historically operationalized ‘development-induced displacement’.

3 Cf. Rulli et al. 2013; Scoones et al. 2013; Edelman 2013; Oya 2013.

4 While most attempts to measure the scale of land grabs have focused on agricultural projects that are primarily located in Africa and Latin America, it is probably in India and China, which together contain 45 per cent of the world’s rural population (World Bank 2012), that the majority of the world’s land dispossession is occurring. While we should also treat these numbers with caution, scholars estimate that in China between 50 and 66 million people were dispossessed for various kinds of development projects between 1980 and 2002 (Hsing 2010), and that over 43 per cent of Chinese villages have experienced compulsory land acquisition since the late 1990s (Landesa 2011). In India, the most comprehensive study has estimated that 60 million people have been displaced from their land for development projects since independence and that the rate of displacement has increased post-liberalization (Fernandes 2008).

dispossession has been increasingly used in recent years to facilitate private industry, real estate and mining, as well as public-private partnerships (PPP) in infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> In many parts of Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia, meanwhile, governments have been handing over large swathes of land to international finance and agribusiness capital (and, to a lesser extent, other states) for agricultural and bio-fuel plantations.<sup>6</sup> Third, this increasing scale and changing character of land grabs has been met with increasingly widespread opposition. Opposition to land grabs has not been explosive everywhere,<sup>7</sup> but it has been documented in many countries across Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia<sup>8</sup> and has become particularly explosive in China<sup>9</sup> and India<sup>10</sup>. Land struggles will likely be a central feature of the political economies of many developing countries in the twenty-first century.

If the growing significance of land dispossession makes understanding its gender implications all the more pressing, scholars have recently argued that we know very little about what those implications are.<sup>11</sup> Behrman et al. identify a “current lack of empirical evidence on the differential effect that large-scale land deals have on men and women” and, more generally, “limited information on how local populations are affected by eviction and resettlement”.<sup>12</sup> Given this lack of information, they suggest, we should be agnostic about the implications of large-scale land deals for women. They remain optimistic that, “If large-scale land investments are properly executed with appropriate attention to gender dimensions, land deals can provide transformative opportunities for both women and men through the introduction of new employment and income generation opportuni-

There is some truth to this assertion. Scholars have paid far more attention to the gendered dimensions of land *tenure* and land *reform* than land *dispossession*. But if we know a lot more about women’s existing land rights than about the consequences of taking them away, we should not overstate our ignorance. While research on the gender implications of some of the newest forms of land dispossession—such as transnational agricultural deals or SEZs—remains slender (largely because they are so new), there already exists a range of important studies of the gender implications of land dispossession under earlier historical regimes, from the English enclosures to the large infrastructural and agricultural projects of state-led development. Such scholarship has already identified many of the gendered consequences of land dispossession that scholars today are beginning to observe, and it provides important points of comparison to illuminate what is actually new about contemporary forms of dispossession. To my knowledge, however, such a comparison has yet to be undertaken.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to consolidate some of the main existing findings about the gendered implications of land dispossession and to interrogate them for comparative insights. It draws on five in-depth case studies of land dispossession driven by different forms of accumulation in distinct socio-historical contexts: capitalist farming and sheep-raising in early capitalist England; colonial and postcolonial rice cultivation projects in the Gambia; large dams under state-led development in India; and oil palm plantations and SEZs under neoliberal regimes in Indonesia and India, respectively. While the first three cases represent dispossession under earlier periods of capitalist development (one distant, two near),

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