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Agricultural and land commercialization – feminist and rights perspectives

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ABSTRACT


The article introduces the Forum on Commercializing Agriculture/Reorganizing Gender, which reports findings from DEMETER project, a collaboration of scholars from Cambodia, Ghana and Switzerland. The project examines how agriculture and food security policies have advanced or hindered gender equality and the right to food; analyzes the role of human rights-based accountability mechanisms in this; and maps gendered changes in livelihoods in situated contexts. We offer a literature review on governance of the international food system from a gender and rights perspective, and on the gendered political economy of agrarian change. We relate the contributions of the Forum to existing literature and preview their findings.

KEYWORDS

Agricultural commercialisation; land commercialisation; gender; right to food; Cambodia; Ghana

The commercialization of agriculture has accelerated in the twenty-first century, integrating farmers in the South ever more tightly into market economies, including global value chains, and driving forward the commodification of farmland and rural labor. It has found its most problematic expression in the wave of land grabs in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Neoliberal economic policies have been a major driver of these transactions, privileging the rights of investors and entrepreneurs to operate in ‘free’ markets in the name of development. They have seeded a new wave of commercialization, further integrating food production and consumption into global markets and creating, for the first time in history, a global market in which farmland is becoming increasingly financialized and thus internationally tradable.

What are the impacts of these developments for global food security? An international regime complex governs food security and combines often contradictory neoliberal ideas about how to organize food production and distribution with rights-based understandings (Margulis 2013). It relies, on the one hand, on economic orthodoxies promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions that celebrate the power of abstract market forces to encourage commercialization. On the other hand, it has opened up to rights perspectives that

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emphasize states' obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food while complying with human rights principles, including participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and the rule of law (Golay and Büschi 2012). These sometimes-contradictory commitments guide policies aimed at achieving food security. To put it simply, the market-based approach that relies on commercialization tends to see the problem as one of the availability of food and expects trickle-down effects of job creation through investments in agro-industrial production. In contrast, the rights approach sees the problem in existing power relations and as a matter of distribution (Saab 2019). International definitions have combined these approaches to suggest that food security is a matter of both availability and accessibility, recognizing that increasingly, wages are needed to purchase food. They have added to this the notion of food adequacy to bring into view nutritional content and cultural values.

The idea of the right to food builds on these definitions. It has gained traction in international debates, in part because of the creation of a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in 2000. Legal activists and scholars had identified codifications of such a right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 25), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (article 11), as well as in several sectorial or regional instruments and national constitutions (Ziegler et al. 2011; Golay 2011; Bourke Martignoni 2019). It has been defined in the General Comment No. 12 of the UN Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as the right of everyone to have 'physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement' (CESCR 1999, paragraph 6). Interpreting the right to food through the lens of human dignity, the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, has underlined that it is the right of every human being to feed oneself and one's family with dignity (Human Rights Council, 7th Session 2008). This right can be attained by ensuring everyone's access to productive resources, including land, as well as access to labor or social assistance schemes (Human Rights Council, 25th Session 2014; Bourke Martignoni 2019).

The right to food approach resonates with efforts to integrate gender equality goals into the international governance of food security. Rural women and gender equality figure in human rights discourses, including on the right to food. Various instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, link gender equality to the right to food. Moreover, gender equality has become a policy priority at the United Nations as gender considerations have been mainstreamed into other policy goals. The UN's agenda for sustainable development, adopted in 2015 and setting goals for 2030, recognizes that achieving the goal of eliminating hunger requires paying attention to women's nutritional needs and their role in small-scale farming. The Rome agencies (FAO, WFP, IFAD) and the World Bank, all have established gender strategies and mainstreamed gender into their strategic planning cycles. The suggestion that gender equality is both a matter of rights and economic efficiency has become an international mantra.

These developments encourage us to explore the impacts of agriculture and land commercialization on food security from the dual perspectives of gender equality and the right to food. For the past six years, the DEMETER project has explored the links between commercialization and food security in case communities in Cambodia and

Ghana.¹ It has critically examined how agriculture and food security policies have contributed to advancing gender equality and the right to food; analyzed the role of human rights-based accountability mechanisms in realizing these rights; and mapped gendered changes in livelihoods in the two countries.

The four articles of this JPS Forum report some findings from the project. Combining scholarship from multiple disciplines, including political economy, development economics, political science, anthropology, law, agronomy, and gender studies, they address different aspects of the topic and employ different methods. One takes a top-down perspective, showing the distinctive ways in which international policy discourse is gendered (Prügl and Joshi, *forthcoming*). A second compares legal realities in Cambodia and Ghana in order to demonstrate that a comprehensive realization of the right to food needs a feminist methodology (Bourke Martignoni 2021). The remaining two articles explore gendered livelihood impacts of land and agricultural commercialization in our case communities. Gironde et al. (2021) document how a rapid transition to commercial agriculture in Cambodia has made family farmers more dependent on cash to access food, which affects food security outcomes along the lines of sex, class, ethnicity and seasonality. Dzanku et al. (2021) show how long-term processes of land and agricultural commercialization are gendered in meanings and highlights outcomes in different districts in Ghana.

In this introduction, we situate these articles in two ways. First, we introduce our two case countries, Cambodia and Ghana, and provide an overview of the methodologies employed in the DEMETER project. Second, we offer a literature review that summarizes existing understandings. We discuss how international development policies are gendered, how gender equality and the right to food have been integrated into such policies, and how international policies and human rights are translated into local contexts and support local activism. We also discuss evidence of the gendered socio-economic realities brought about by land and agriculture commercialization, including its impact on food security. We bring the insights and findings of the project into conversation with this literature.

Neoliberal commercialization in Cambodia and Ghana

Cambodia and Ghana share the fact that their governments at the beginning of the 1990s entered a path of democratization combined with economic liberalization, embracing the neoliberal orthodoxy that agriculture would flourish through the promotion of free market principles, entrepreneurship and private land ownership. For governments in both countries, agricultural development is a priority and both have in place policies to encourage large-scale production.

For Cambodia, the shift towards economic liberalization coincided with the end of turmoil following the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 1970s and a subsequent civil war in the 1980s. The 1993 elections under UN supervision brought to power a government intent on building a free-market economy while strengthening its control over land and natural resources to leverage political power. Today, Cambodia is a key site of rapid agriculture and land commercialization. Supported by international development institutions,

¹DEMETER is an acronym for **D**roits et **E**galité pour une **M**eilleure **E**conomie de la **T**erre. It is a research partnership of scholars from Cambodia, Ghana, and Switzerland and is funded under the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d program). See project website at <https://r4d-demeter.info/>.

national policymakers have approached agricultural development mostly from a macro-economic perspective seeking to foster growth. Land policies have entailed a concessions system, which has attracted domestic and foreign capital (especially from Vietnam and Japan) and generated investments in large-scale rice production and irrigation schemes in lowland provinces and around the Great Lake, and in rubber plantations in Ratanakiri and Kampong Thom. It also has invited massive commercial logging and fostered the internal migration of Khmer farmers in search of land. Although the 2001 Land Law included a social land concessions clause intended to alleviate rural landlessness and poverty, economic land concessions have led to the more or less violent expulsion of indigenous non-Khmer populations and smallholder farmers with insecure titles, together with a vast loss of access to forests and communal lands (Gironde and Ramirez 2019; Cambodia Human Development Report 2007). Land concessions also have served to enrich political and military elites as the government shored up its power through patronage and built the basis for an increasingly authoritarian regime. Commercialization in Cambodia thus is synonymous with human rights violations, land grabs, (domestic and foreign) investment, massive deforestation, the introduction of cash crops, and a growing need for cash for commercial crop inputs, investments and food (Gironde, Golay, and Messerli 2015; Reysoo and Suon 2017).

Unlike in Cambodia, in Ghana the return to democracy in 1993, after years of populist and military rule, entailed no major shift in economic policies. Rather, the transformed Rawlings government remained true to the neoliberal economic orthodoxy that had informed its structural adjustment policies in the 1980s. With a strong export-oriented sector since colonial times, involving in particular the production of cocoa, Ghana's agriculture has long been deeply integrated in international markets. Its free market policies have garnered it extensive support from international development actors since the 1980s, and its development policies, including in the food and agriculture sector, have focused on strengthening the private sector as the key engine of growth. A multi-year, internationally funded land administration project (LAP) was put in place starting in 2011, geared towards establishing a regulatory framework and promoting land titling and registration in order to determine land boundaries, strengthen land markets and increase land security. Today, small-scale farming continues to dominate agriculture, but there are also well-developed systems of contract farming, plantations and medium sized farming. There is clear evidence of development processes putting pressure on land across the country, of changing land tenure, and of increasing land sales even in the less-commercialized North. Customary authorities have been integrated into land administration, and they largely control land tenure with sometimes detrimental effects for women (Whitehead and Tsikata 2003). While land grabs are less extensive than in Cambodia, peasant dispossession has a long history involving transnational corporations acquiring land for large-scale plantations and mining and logging concessions from the state (Dzanku et al. 2021). There are also reports of chiefs using their prerogative as custodians of the land to sell large tracts, including the commons (Lanz, Gerber, and Haller 2018; Tsikata and Yaro 2014; Boamah 2014).

Despite the rights violations engendered by commercialization processes, both countries have made commitments to the right to food and gender equality, and are parties to the relevant UN Conventions, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol, and both voted in favor of the

adoption of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas in 2018. Cambodia's constitution provides that these treaties supersede domestic law and should be fully implemented (article 31). However, reviews of Cambodia's commitments by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Cambodia and by the relevant treaty bodies have found violations of women's rights and the rights of vulnerable groups in the context of large-scale land acquisitions (Human Rights Council, 21st Session. 2012), and there are numerous ongoing cases of land disputes. Cambodia has implemented legal reform on gender rights and a land titling program that sets up joint titles, but there are severe deficits in implementation (Baaz, Lilja, and Östlund 2017).

In Ghana, gender equality is guaranteed in the constitution, and the Supreme Court has confirmed that the right to food is protected by constitutional provisions, even if implicitly. Ghana has ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and its Women's Protocol, which recognizes women's right to food and the obligation to ensure gender equality. The country also has a national human rights institution – the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, which has a broad mandate to protect human rights, including the right to food and gender equality. Ghana underwent its first Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council in 2008 where NGOs submitted a report raising concerns that the expansion of mining operations and the related deployment of the military and police to the mining areas has led to human rights violations, including violations of the right to food (FIAN and WACAM 2008). More recently, NGOs have criticized the Ghanaian media for spearheading a campaign against water pollution and environmental degradation that has targeted small-scale mining, while large-scale mining receives tax and other incentives. They argue that this amounts to a violation of the rights of artisanal miners and displays double standards in favor of large-scale mining and chiefs (Abdulai 2017).

The intensity of agricultural and land commercialization and the recognition of the right to food and gender equality in the two countries make them particularly interesting cases for study. So are the differences between them, which allow us to explore the varying ways in which hegemonic logics are translated. These pertain, in particular, to the *pace* of commercialization, which has stretched over decades in Ghana while proceeding at an astonishingly rapid speed in post-conflict Cambodia; to the *size* of landholdings, with small-scale farming continuing to dominate in Ghana while large-scale economic land concessions account for half of farmland in Cambodia today; and to the *political contexts* of a strengthening democracy in Ghana juxtaposed to strengthening authoritarianism in Cambodia. Cambodia thus has a frontier character, with investments in farmland and agriculture taking the form of fortune hunting, facilitated by high levels of political corruption. In contrast, Ghana has established a Westminster-style democracy that negotiates legal pluralism and the significant influence of (public and private) international development actors. Building on colonial structures of export-oriented agriculture, it has sought to further commercialize smallholder production and develop large-scale plantations and contract farming in parallel.

Demeter research methodology

Commercialization is the concept that anchors our project. In the literature on agricultural development, commercial agriculture signifies the opposite of subsistence production,

indicating the creation of divisions of labor and the insertion of production and distribution into market economies (Braun and Kennedy 1994). Commercialization is also a historical process of the gradual expansion of markets that has taken different forms in different historical periods. Following Marxist thought, it builds on the on-going commodification of goods, labor, land and nature. With Polanyi and others (Polanyi 1944; Block and Somers 2014), we approach markets as institutions created through policies. With feminist political economists, we recognize markets as ruled by gender hierarchical social norms (Prügl 2008; Elson 1999).

In order to gauge the different shapes and trajectories of commercialization, we selected four districts in Ghana and six communes in Cambodia. In Ghana, the two Southern districts of Asunafo North and Kwaebibirem are more prosperous, ecologically more endowed, and more commercialized than the two in the North (Garu-Tempene and East Gonja), which are poorer, dryer, and less commercialized.² While land scarcity has developed in both regions, it is particularly pronounced in the South. Ghana thus lends itself well to geographical comparisons. In contrast, the rapid pace of commercialization in Cambodia invites comparisons over time. We picked two communes each in the provinces of Kampong Thom (Krayea and Boeung Lvea), Kratie (Pi Thnou and Srae Char), and Ratanakiri (Lom Choir and Malik), the latter two inhabited by a significant number of indigenous peoples. These provinces have seen massive investments in economic land concessions, which have profoundly transformed local livelihoods.

The specificity of the project lay in the fact that it brought legal and policy approaches to bear on an understanding of situated economic developments and their impacts on food security. Accordingly, we pursued two distinctive lines of inquiry. First, we asked, what gendered changes in livelihoods arise from contemporary processes of agriculture and land commercialization, and how do these changes affect food security? Second, we explored the roles of international policies and legal discourse in these processes, including on the one hand policies of economic liberalization and on the other hand the promotion of gender equality and the right to food. We thus entered the topic of food security from different disciplinary starting points in the hope of creating a mosaic of insight.

Data collection involved a mix of methods from the social sciences and law, including most importantly, semi-structured and expert interviews, surveys, document and legal analysis. The semi-structured interviews targeted women and men of various ages and ethnic origins in our case communities. Expert interviews involved legal experts, policy-makers, civil society organizations, national, sub-national and local authorities. We also conducted a household survey in our case communities in 2016, which we repeated in a reduced form in 2019. The questionnaires were administered to both women and men, and included breakdowns by gender, ethnicity and age. In addition to livelihood data and gauges of nutritional status, the questionnaires included questions on access to authorities, knowledge of laws, and satisfaction with local institutions. For the legal and policy analyses, we compiled a database of relevant international, national, and

²Ghana's North-South economic divide, which is an effect of colonial and post-colonial policies that neglected northern Ghana and created a labor reserve for the cocoa plantations, mines and industries in the South, is reflected in the high levels of labor out-migration from Northern to Southern Ghana. The North-South divide is also reflected in differences in crops - cocoa, oil palm, rubber and coconut grown on relatively larger farms in Southern Ghana, and food crops - cereals, legumes and cassava grown commercially on smaller tracts of land in Northern Ghana.

local policy documents, laws and legal decisions. We also tracked debates on the right to food and gender equality in UN bodies.

Our livelihoods analysis is both deductive and inductive, drawing insights from our multiple databases. The transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews were coded in the qualitative data-analysis software NVivo in order to infer empirically grounded categories and themes. The household surveys were analyzed with descriptive statistics and multivariate regressions. Policy and legal studies involved coding of interview data and documents, and analyzing for content and for discursive patterns.

Gender, rights and commercialization: the state of the art

An extensive, multi-disciplinary literature exists interrogating agrarian transitions, globalization, and development from a gender and rights perspective. Our reading of this literature is informed by the different directions of inquiry we pursue in the DEMETER project. First, we examine literature on development policies, the right to food, and the effort to mainstream gender into such policies. This literature provides insight into international governance, its implementation and translation into local contexts, and into activism around the right to food. Second, we provide an overview of the literature documenting the gendered socio-economic realities and livelihood changes that have paralleled such policies and laws, with a particular focus on food security outcomes.

Governing commercialization/governing gender

Feminist scholarship has consistently documented that gender-blind development policies have hurt women. Efforts of ‘modernization’ have generated highly unequal outcomes, as have the neoliberal economic policies that replaced them (Tsikata and Kerr 2000; Whitehead and Lockwood 1999; Kabeer 1994). In the area of agriculture, the removal of production subsidies, the privatization of the marketing of agricultural products, and the privileging of cash crops over food crops, all have been detrimental to groups disadvantaged in their access to capital and other productive resources – in particular women, migrants, and youth (Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks 2009; Whitehead 2008; Gladwin 1991).

A key problem is that the orthodox economic theories that have informed these policies are blatantly gender-blind: They conceptualize households as harmonious and fail to recognize women’s reproductive labor (Folbre 1986; Elson 1995; Razavi 2009). Women continue to be responsible for much of the reproductive work, which reduces their mobility, their ability to market their produce, and increases their time poverty and labor deficits. When policies disregard issues of social reproduction or address them separately, they ignore linkages to and trade-offs against food security resulting from women’s unpaid care work and time poverty (Kerr 2012).

Gender-blind policies focusing on the creation of land markets have had similarly adverse effects (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997). An orthodox tool to facilitate land commercialization has been the provision of titles; but gender-blind or biased land titling programs often have ended up curtailing women’s access to land, especially upon divorce or widowhood. The more-recent revaluing of customary land management as an efficient basis for land markets has often allowed for a deepening of discrimination against

women both as members of land holding groups and as potential buyers of land interests (Tsikata 2009). Land grabbing is equally not gender neutral. Levien (2017) shows that, although the impacts of dispossession are locally varied, they are overwhelmingly negative for women, affecting in particular gender divisions of labor. Our case study of Cambodia confirms that in the wake of land commercialization, women have fewer job opportunities than men and often become dependent on male income earning (Gironde et al. 2021).

If twentieth century agriculture and development policies were largely gender-blind, international organizations today recognize the importance of considering gender relations in agriculture and food security policies. Projects seeking to address the role of 'women in development' and 'gender in development' have given way to a mainstreaming of gender considerations into the core missions of organizations (Prügl 2016). And as gender approaches have also been integrated into scholarship, a body of professional expertise increasingly accompanies such organizational mainstreaming (Kunz and Prügl 2019). This has on the one hand given visibility to the problem of gender inequality, but on the other hand, it has raised critique of gender being co-opted into existing paradigms, including paradigms of commercialization. The 'smart economics' approach of the World Bank, in particular, has come to inform the way in which gender is understood in development interventions. It subordinates gender equality to gains in economic efficiency and instrumentalizes women for economic growth, food security, and other development outcomes. Women are approached as rational economic actors who must be fit into a capitalist economy without changing the structural inequalities intrinsic in this economy (Esquivel 2017; Calkin 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012). Such policy discourse in addition constructs certain monolithic – and thus somewhat mythical – identities of rural women, including those of the productive farmer and the vulnerable provider identified by Prügl and Joshi (forthcoming).

In contrast, the right to food approach puts equality at the center, making it an end of its own, not simply a means to achieve food security or fighting hunger. The UN's Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food have discussed 'the structural, cultural, legal, economic and ecological barriers that women face in their enjoyment of the right to food' (Human Rights Council, 22nd Session 2012; Human Rights Council, 31st Session 2015, 1). But the integration of gender into the right to food encounters similar problems as its integration into development policies and programs. Bourke Martignoni (2019) highlights in particular the tendency of right to food discourse to associate 'the rural woman' with food insecurity and to locate gender inequality in local customs while ignoring the way it operates in macroeconomic logics. In her study of two initiatives to establish principles for responsible investment in agriculture, one led by the World Bank and one by the World Council on Food Security (CFS), Collins (2018) both agrees and disagrees with this assessment. On the one hand, she criticizes the principles for presuming that it is desirable to incorporate women into existing logics of financialization. On the other hand she suggests that they underestimate potential tensions between the recognition of customary rights and the promotion of gender equality, nor do they take into account socio-cultural norms that shape the gender division of labor and the under-representation of women in political bodies.

Whether or not local norms receive excessive or not enough recognition in international documents, international policies often falter in the politics of implementation.

There is a rich literature in development studies describing the vagaries of implementation (Mosse 2005; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007); and in socio-legal studies describing the politics of translating international norms into situated contexts (Zwingel 2012; Merry 2006). Agricultural development programs have to negotiate and often take advantage of existing political hierarchies and patriarchal governance structures, which may foil efforts to advance gender equality. In the private agricultural investment scheme in Ghana described by Lanz, Prügl, and Gerber (2020), chiefs and their families were able to capture benefits from accompanying corporate social responsibility programs that were to empower women. Male patronage networks also can derail the intent of gender mainstreaming. Thus, in South-East Asia, gender-mainstreamed fisheries management policies inadvertently reinforced traditionally male-dominated networks of patronage (Resurreccion 2008). And in the contentious politics of land commercialization in Cambodia, resources are distributed through party-based clientelism, which also circumscribes mechanisms for conflict resolution (Joshi 2020).

Against such obstacles, a right to food approach promises a politics of accountability. It brings into view states' legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food without discrimination (CESCR 1999; 2001; Mechlem 2004; De Haen 2005; Ziegler et al. 2011; Human Rights Council, 25th Session 2014). It also helps equalize power relations within and between societies. In the words of De Haen, a 'rights-based approach shifts the focus from state *benevolence* to greater equality in power relations. Under a right-to-food framework, those who would otherwise be constrained to suffering the consequences of inappropriate policies are *promoted to rights holders*, allowing them to demand a voice in policy formulation, to hold their governments accountable for negative actions and omissions and, thereby, to motivate them to act' (De Haen 2005, xxii, emphases added). Policies, such as commercialization, would then be measured against their acceptance by and usefulness for rights-holders.

Not surprisingly, the promotion and protection of human rights is viewed by many agrarian social movements as a core component in their strategies for socio-economic, political and legal change. Surveying a range of countries Monsalve Suárez (2013, 251) shows that using the human rights framework has had impacts ranging from

the empowerment of oppressed groups to stand up for their rights, decreasing violence in land conflicts, changing the way conflicts over resources are framed, opening up space for policy dialogue centred on people's lives, fighting against agrarian legislation biased in favour of corporate interests and formulating alternative legal frameworks.

Other studies have revealed the empowering potential of the right to food in concrete cases, such as in the *Fame Zero* program in Brazil (Graziano Da Silva, Del Grossi, and de França 2011).

As these studies show, the effectiveness of the right to food stems not only from its codification in laws and constitutions, but requires framing conditions that allow it to emerge as a practice. Bourke-Martignoni (2021) addresses such conditions as she develops a feminist methodology for assessing the right to food. These combine an emphasis on women's agency and participation with the existence of legal and justice systems that promote economic, social and cultural rights, and of political and economic institutions that recognize the negative impact of extractivism and value egalitarian outcomes. Monsalve Suarez complements these conditions from a bottom-up perspective, and explores

what is necessary for the poor to be able to use human rights frameworks effectively. She recognizes the need to combine legal and political strategies, litigation and advocacy, among other enabling factors, such as awareness and resources (Monsalve Suárez 2013, 248–49). Baaz, Lilja, and Östlund (2017) add an additional element, which is the embedding of rights in hegemonic discourses. They argue that the implementation of law ‘is always carried out by individuals, acting through certain subject positions,’ and as a result ‘hegemonic discourses will invariably affect the interpretation and outcome of the law’ (Baaz, Lilja, and Östlund 2017, 225). This is why stereotypical constructions of women as farmers, nurturers or victims matter – they are part of discourses that come to inform policies and activism in a particular way.

Policies and legal discourses enable and give shape to processes of commercialization. As shown, such policies have gone from gender-biased and gender-blind to gender-sensitive and sometimes rights-based. Yet gender has remained troublesome as it has been co-opted into projects of commercialization and become a focus of contestation. How ideas of rights and gender equality come to shape these processes depends on the way activists take them up and on the way policies are implemented. The literature on feminist political economy and food security studies offer insights on such politics and its effects.

Feminist political economy and food security studies

Feminist political economy and food security studies theorize and answer questions about the gendered impacts of land and agricultural commercialization in situated contexts. This literature is vast, engaging evidence from multiple disciplines. From the perspective of the DEMETER project it is useful to differentiate between the rapid commercialization described in the land grabbing literature (which speaks to our research sites in Cambodia) and the longer processes of agricultural commercialization since the colonial period (which speaks to our research sites in Ghana).

Based on existing scholarship on the gendered nature of land rights and agrarian production systems, some commentary on land grabbing acknowledged likely gendered impacts and implications early on (Kachika 2010; Borras and Franco 2010; Cotula et al. 2009). Feminist agrarian scholars drew attention to the way pre-existing gender inequalities shaped the stakes of those affected, compared women’s and men’s responses to dispossession, and highlighted their differential ability to take up the opportunities opened up (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012; Tsikata and Yaro 2014; Daley and Pallas 2014; Park and White 2017; Chu 2011; Izumi 2007; Julia and White 2012; Mutopo and Chiveshe 2014; Doss, Summerfield, and Tsikata 2014). That early literature revealed a pattern of land dispossession without adequate compensation, which was gendered in its effects. Employment opportunities created by agricultural investments were transient, insecure and mainly directed at men, and few women were able to take advantage of the opportunities for share contracts. Instead, women lost the resources they derived in the past from harvesting the commons, while enjoying mostly ancillary benefits provided through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, which were mainly targeted at their domestic activities and at their children (Tsikata and Yaro 2014; Daley and Pallas 2014; Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012; Piacenza 2012; Julia and White 2012).

Another reported effect was the increase in women's workloads. In Cambodia for example, the agricultural wage work in areas impacted by ELCs was associated with more work for women, generating time poverty with potentially negative consequences for food security (Ironsides 2009; Maffii 2009; Paramita 2013). In upland rice systems, when farmers reduced fallows due to pressure to raise production, weeds frequently increased, and gender roles were re-inscribed as middle-aged women performed more weeding or applied weedicides, while men and younger women migrated (Pierce Colfer 2013). Similar effects are reported from Ethiopia, where large-scale land transactions resulted in increased labor time for women (Hajjar et al. 2019). Other effects pertain to gender divisions of labor changing as a result of land loss. Thus, in his historically and geographically wide-ranging comparative review of the effects of land dispossession on women, Levien (2017) illustrates how changes in the gender division of labor linked to land commercialization were invariably disadvantageous to women, though this differed by class and caste.

Critical engagement with the land grabbing literature resulted in calls for a second generation of studies that would pay attention to longer term processes of land and agrarian commercialization (Oya 2013; Edelman 2013; Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012), attend to labor questions (Li 2011) and pay more consistent attention to the gendered nature of agrarian transformation. In this vein, recent studies have broadened the discussion from the dispossession of smallholder farmers to processes that have locked them into global agricultural value chains as plantation workers, contract farmers, and small and medium scale farmers producing for export markets. They show that the outcomes of commercialization policies differ depending on local contexts and investment practices. And although commercialization seems to increase household incomes in the aggregate, it also generates considerable inequality and new vulnerabilities as it expands patriarchal norms and ways of doing that favor men and boys (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017; Park and White 2017; Park and Maffii 2017; Gironde et al. 2021).

Feminist political economy approaches inform this newer literature and provide it concepts and framings. They have over several decades drawn attention to the 'the pervasiveness of gender relations and their interconnections with broader processes of social change' (Razavi 2009, 197) in agrarian social relations, institutions, and movements. With regard to the global South, they have shown that with commercialization and the associated class differentiation, 'women's independent farming came under increasing pressure, while many men were able to solidify their command over land, labour, and capital resources' (Razavi 2009, 203). The gender differentiated access to and control over resources of all kinds, including land, labor, capital, technologies and institutions, has reproduced gender inequalities since the colonial period (Tsikata 2016; Razavi 2003; Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997; Deere and Leon 2001; Agarwal 1994). Feminist political ecology approaches, which stress the gender and environment nexus, have widened this discussion in inviting us to think of land beyond its productive capacity and bring into view the dynamic relationship between gender, the environment and other aspects of social and cultural life (Nightingale 2006). In our project, we encountered how land is caught up in understandings of community and belonging and is a source of power and security under certain conditions. Land loss thus has not only economic impacts, but also threatens peoples' status and sense of security.

Intra-household relations of production and reproduction are a crucial aspect of the gendered impacts of commercialization (Naidu and Ossome 2016; Elson 1998). As men's

subsistence labor becomes wage labor or is incorporated into value chains, this has entailed a 'productive deprivation' of women. Their labor gets displaced and new gender divisions of labor emerge (Harriss-White 2005). Women's labor remains unremunerated, loses value, and becomes readily available as a low-cost input into projects of commercialization. Thus, studies of export-oriented agriculture have shown that investment schemes typically have created a low-paid, often seasonal, and disproportionately female labor force, although differentiated by other status positions (Sulle and Dancer 2019; Bigler et al. 2017; Barndt 2008; Barrientos et al. 1999). Moreover, gendered inequalities, in intersection with other status positions, have facilitated the extraction of surplus value from agriculture, establishing 'chains of exploitation' with rural women at the bottom and companies at the top (Luna 2019; Maffii 2009; Prasad 2016). Research has concluded that a combination of pre-existing gender inequalities, women's lack of power to exercise rights, and the gender blindness and biases of projects are responsible for the poor livelihood outcomes and gendered impacts of commercial agriculture projects (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012; Daley and Park 2012; Mutopo 2011; Izumi 2007).

In our study, we expand on this line of questioning to encompass (a) the nexus between land and labor relations, and (b) the interface between productive and reproductive labor. On these questions, certain insights of the feminist political economy literature have been particularly useful. First, it has highlighted how land titling, considered in neoliberal policy circles as a prerequisite for creating land markets, has led to women losing access to land (Razavi 2003; Agarwal 1994; Deere and León 1987). It has also cautioned that land rights alone are not sufficient for women to flourish in the context of markets that institutionalize unequal gender relations (Razavi 2007). Second, feminist political economists have brought into view the changing character of social reproduction in contexts of commercialization when hitherto non-market transactions become subject to market principles (Bhattacharya 2017; Razavi 2009; Fraser 2016). They have thus shifted the focus so that the starting point of political economy is not surplus production but care and the production of life. This also highlights food and nutrition security as critical aspects of social reproduction.

Our studies take up the important debate about whether agricultural commercialization and land dispossessions accompanied by the introduction of wage work improve or adversely affect the food security of smallholder households, and how gendered divisions of productive and reproductive labor affect food security outcomes (Quisumbing et al. 1998). Our Ghana study joins other emerging literature that finds little improvement in nutritional outcomes as a result of commercialization (Carletto, Corral, and Guelfi 2017). Indeed, it diagnoses situations of 'over-commercialization' characterized by distress sales necessary to combat hunger (Dzanku et al. 2021).

The literature thus raises doubts over the postulated relationship between commercialization and food security. Both pathways, that of food production and that of earning off-farm income, emerge as problematic for women, with land loss and seasonal food shortages on the one hand and new dependencies on men's income on the other, as major obstacles. While contexts and intersectional inequalities matter, unfettered land and agricultural commercialization seems to benefit especially those without care responsibilities and with access to power and resources. We explore these issues in the articles of this Forum.

Introducing the four articles

The four articles included in this Forum address the governance of the international food system on the one hand, and the political economies of agrarian change in Cambodia and Ghana on the other.

Prügl and Joshi examine food security discourse in international organizations at the intersection of neoliberal productivism and a commitment to gender equality. They critically analyze documents that have been developed in international organizations as part of a mandate of gender mainstreaming. They argue that the gender expertise reflected in these documents produces political effects when it imagines the identities of rural women, defines what their problems are, and suggests respective solutions. The analysis reveals two distinctive constructions of women's identities in food security discourse – the productive female farmer and the caring woman food securer. Different problem definitions and solutions emerge from these constructions: while the woman farmer needs to get access to resources and an adjustment of institutional incentives, the vulnerable food securer needs protection, but also political participation. The paper demonstrates that international discourses include multiple and sometimes contradictory understandings of gender, and argues that they provide a terrain for contesting neoliberal hegemony.

The second article approaches the governance of gender and commercialization from a human rights perspective and moves the focus to the national levels of Cambodia and Ghana. Joanna Bourke Martignoni considers how a feminist methodology that foregrounds the right to food and inter-related human rights might be used to identify the inequalities engendered in rural communities through forms of neoliberal agricultural development. Such a methodology requires that attention be paid to power relations at various scales, from the household and community to national and global economic, political, social and legal institutions. It also necessitates an examination of the intersections of various systems of oppression grounded in gender, social class, caste, ethnicity, age, geographical location and ability. Applying this approach to Cambodia and Ghana, the article illustrates how relations of power are dynamic and vary over time and across place. It also brings into relief the multiple, sometimes surprising and contradictory ways in which agency might be exercised by rights holders. Bourke Martignoni argues for going beyond the traditional technical focus of many food security and rural development projects, which tend to depoliticize and co-opt struggles for equality while leaving oppressive institutions and structures largely untouched.

The two subsequent articles shift the focus and look at the effects of land and agricultural commercialization on food security in the contexts of Cambodia and Ghana. The first article, on the livelihood implications of large-scale land acquisitions in Cambodia (Gironde et al.) examines the applicability of earlier literature, which found that women were more negatively affected by large-scale land acquisitions than men. It finds that in the aftermath of commercialization, men spent less time on traditional tasks, such as forest clearing and hunting, and their farm work became easier because of the use of new technologies. In contrast, women's workload became heavier because of the need for more weeding, their increased participation in wage work, and the more demanding nature of reproductive activities, such as finding fuel wood for cooking. The time and income scarcity engendered by the re-organization of their livelihoods had an adverse effect on household diets. The study concludes that gender relations and identities are re-signified as a result of the changes in the agro-food system and large-scale land

acquisitions. The need for cash to buy food has created new vulnerabilities that should make us wary of the food security implications of agricultural commercialization.

Whereas the Cambodia article traces the effects of commercialization over time, the Ghana study takes advantage of geographical differences to capture variations in degrees of commercialization. Commercialization rates were much higher for Southern Ghana, compared with the North. There also was a significant difference between female and male farmers: while the total value of crops sold was higher for men, women sold a larger portion of the crops they produced. This apparently contradictory result was due to higher levels of distress sales among women, particularly in Northern Ghana. Thus, female commercialization in the North was driven more by necessity than by accumulation, and therefore could be described as 'distress push' commercialization. The article also finds that on average farm households experienced food shortages for at least one third of the year in spite of high rates of commercialization. It cautions against relying exclusively on food markets for attaining farm household food security in contexts prone to distress sales. The study concludes that over-commercialization hurts food security in the absence of off-farm livelihood diversification and efficient food markets.

In sum, agrarian transitions based on accelerated land commercialization appear to repeat the deeply gendered processes identified already in the women and development literature of the 1980s. The full theorization of how gender intersects with multiple axes of inequalities is still work in progress. Our research contributes to this by examining the intersections of gender with class, age and ethnicity in the agrarian transformation associated with large-scale land acquisitions and in long-term processes of agricultural commercialization in different economic and geographical contexts. The case studies of Cambodia and Ghana caution us against expecting an unproblematic association of commercialization with food security. Volatility of prices and income insecurities, over-commercialization and distress sales are realities for people living contemporary transitions in rural areas.

A human rights methodology brings into view the power relations that suffuse commercialization processes, the rights violations they may engender, and the multiple dimensions that food security policies need to consider. Gender-mainstreaming and rights-based policies have begun to address these dimensions. They have the potential to recognize the vulnerabilities, pathologies, and injustices that result from entrusting food security to unfettered commercialization and to advance more just and inclusive processes and outcomes.

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