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Legally Entitled or Dispossessed? Gender, Large-Scale Land Acquisitions and Agrarian Transformation in Cambodia

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Summary

Over the last decade, large-scale land acquisitions for the purposes of natural resource extraction and agribusiness have expanded in several countries, particularly in the Global South. In Cambodia, large-scale land acquisitions were enabled through Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) under the 2001 Land Law, which also transformed customary norms governing land access. Between 2001 and 2012, while smallholders' access to land shrank considerably, the Cambodian government is estimated to have leased more than half the country's arable land to private investors for agro-industrial development. This article focuses on the gendered implications of large-scale land acquisitions by mapping shifting agrarian livelihoods against reforms enacted under the 2001 Land Law. I argue that though the current legal framework governing land in Cambodia includes the provision of joint titling of private property, it simultaneously transformed access to the "commons." This shift, alongside the contestations inherent in legalizing property, are key to transforming agrarian livelihoods in Cambodia, experienced through locally specific gender relations. I support my arguments using qualitative interviews conducted in villages bordering ELCs in two provinces in northeast Cambodia.

Keywords: gender, Cambodia, land reforms, large-scale land acquisitions, dispossession

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