

Gender, generation and agrarian change: cases from Myanmar and Cambodia

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Abstract

Rural communities, physical landscapes and social relations have been deeply transformed in countries in Southeast Asia by the effects of the *global land rush*. The surge of initiatives around industrial development, hydropower projects, monocrop commercial plantations, mining and conservation has given way to a process of appropriation of land and natural resources unprecedented in scale, speed and scope. This has been underwritten by a favorable environment of neoliberal market-driven reforms, trade policies and investment flows that are the expression of the fast-track development model embraced by most countries in the region, including Cambodia and Myanmar. Today, the climate change agenda and the commitments to reduce emissions have created the conditions for an expanded menu of land and resource grabs justified in the name of the environmental good, so called ‘green grabs’. Southeast Asia has thus become a “core region of concern in land grab studies”.

This body of work has also begun to integrate gender and, to a lesser extent, generational perspectives in analyses of agrarian and environmental transformations, advancing a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of land grabs. However to date, literature in these areas remains limited while as in land grabs studies ‘local people’ and ‘local communities’ are often assumed to be homogeneous groups of people with similar interests, identities and aspirations. This has not only severe analytical limitations but also political implications.

This is a time where different visions and pathways towards transformation and sustainability are confronting each other and shaping the politics of agrarian and environmental change. Increasing pressures on land and natural resources have given rise to political reactions and mobilization from below. New spaces for addressing power imbalances and structural inequalities are being created within countervisions of social justice, environmental sustainability and alternative economies. By engaging with a “politically charged, high profile arena”, scholars and activists can thus open opportunities for centering gender and generational justice in the politics of land grabs, in the context of struggles for social justice.

Building on feminist political economy and with feminist political ecology as the overarching intellectual and political project, this thesis contributes to furthering the understanding of the implications of land grab in Southeast Asia with an analysis of gendered and ‘generationed’ patterns of rural dispossession, incorporation and political reactions from below with empirical evidence from Cambodia and Myanmar. The thesis also aims *to*

make the case for centering gender and generations into the politics of land grabs and argues that there can be no real social justice if attention is not paid to everyday struggles in diverse contexts and without a commitment to changing relations of power relations that perpetuate social injustices. Finally, it is the testimony of my personal and intellectual journey in search of ways to bring together my experience as development practitioner and gender specialist, engaged researcher, and feminist and contribute to bridging divides towards meaningful transformation.