

Women and Land Deals in Africa and Asia: Weighing the Implications and Changing the Game

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Large-scale land deals in the new millennium have attracted much media attention, and several international initiatives are attempting to regulate such deals. However, the existing literature and most regulatory initiatives do not address gender adequately. To fill this gap, Elizabeth Daley and Sabine Pallas reviewed evidence from four case studies included in the International Land Coalition Global Study on Commercial Pressures on Land (conducted in 2010) to identify implications of land deals for women and policy actions to address them. Daley and Pallas analyzed evidence from land deals in Ethiopia, Rwanda, the Philippines, and India from the late 1990s to 2010 using a framework that posits four dimensions of underlying discrimination, relevant to assessing outcomes for women. The study analyzed three of these dimensions in depth – access to productive resources, relative income poverty, and participation in decision making.

Women are disadvantaged. Daley and Pallas found that women are likely to be affected differently – and disproportionately more negatively – by land deals than men. The individual details were crucial. The Ethiopian case study shows clear evidence of relative disadvantages to women because of their reduced rights of access to common property and consequent negative effects for relative income poverty, as well as sociocultural obstacles that block women's participation in decision making about land deals. The Philippines case study also shows relative disadvantages to women losing rights of access to formerly common property foreshores, with consequent effects for relative income poverty in terms of employment opportunities and also for livelihoods and food security.

Low wages, increased participation in decision making. However, the situation with regard to women's participation in decision making about land deals is much more positive. The Rwandan case study shows gains for women from increased employment and self-employment opportunities but at low wages and the effects on livelihoods and food security of reduced rights of access to land; all of which are mediated by women's strong participation in decision making in Rwanda. The Indian case study suggests largely negative effects for women manifesting through reduced rights of access to productive resources and limited employment opportunities for women that adversely affect relative income poverty and their livelihoods and food security.

However, this case also shows a significant positive effect on women's participation in decision making, with the land deals encouraging the mobilization and political empowerment of vulnerable Dalit women.

Conclusions. Daley and Pallas draw two conclusions from their analysis. First, the gender implications with respect to common property seem more important than the effects land deals have on people's formal land ownership and employment. This is because reduced access to common property has more diverse spillover effects for broader livelihoods and food security – and for women's relative income poverty – than limited new employment opportunities, and because women generally have less secure land tenure and more limited land ownership to begin with than men. Second, the gender implications of land deals on the political front may be, in the longer term, as important, if not more important, than those on the economic front in achieving gender justice and moving toward greater gender equality across the board. This is because the negative economic effects of land deals have helped women's political empowerment in at least some cases, and, as with any important socioeconomic change, the rush for land opens up space to contest the status quo.

Putting gender at the center. These findings imply that ongoing international regulatory initiatives around land deals must place gender issues at their center, including by developing gender-sensitive and locally appropriate tools and procedures. Daley and Pallas recommend practical actions that can help change the game for women, such as shoring up women's weak land rights through land registration and titling; encouraging companies to enact family-friendly policies so women can take advantage of employment opportunities created by land deals; and promoting women's participation in decision making during land negotiations.

Read the article in full at:

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