

Coercive Harmony in Land Acquisition: The Gendered Impact of Corporate “Responsibility” in the Brazilian Amazon

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In 1991, the *quebradeiras de coco babaçu* – the babassu-breaker women of Brazil, who harvest and process nuts from the babassu palm tree – united to form the largest women-led association of extractive producers in the country: the inter-state Movement of the Babassu Breaker Women (MIQCB). In their traditional communities in the northeastern states of Maranhão and Piauí and northern states of Tocantins and Pará, these descendants of detribalized natives, enslaved Africans, and immigrants displaced by large estates built their own way of life based on the common use of lands and forest resources traditionally accessed according to ethnic- and gender-based local rules. The phenomenon of large-scale land acquisition by large companies or investors, aiming to produce commodities or merely to speculate, violates the babassu-breaker women’s traditional-use rights to lands in the Amazon. In a 2010–11 case study of the acquisitions by the Brazil-based company Suzano Paper and Pulp of lands traditionally occupied by babassu-breaker women, Noemi Miyasaka Porro and Joaquim Shiraishi Neto investigate the effects of acquisitions on gender relations.

Claims of social responsibility. In Brazil, the rights of peoples and traditional communities are ensured in the Federal Constitution of 1988 and in various national laws. In response to these laws, state governments and private companies that make large land acquisitions claim they are investing in social responsibility, which should guarantee the rights of traditional communities. However, for these companies social responsibility means providing donations and palliative services. Porro and Shiraishi Neto find that a seemingly harmonious relationship exists between Suzano Paper and Pulp and affected local communities, including negotiations that contrast with the violent land conflicts of the past decades. However, in preliminary surveys the authors heard accounts, especially by women, of coercion from the company, which ignored women’s claims over traditionally used lands while prohibiting them to plant their agricultural fields and damaging water streams with agro-toxic residues. As the company installed its gigantic plant, land prices skyrocketed and men increasingly migrated for jobs elsewhere, while women remained to provide for the children from the few babassu palms left. These changes led Porro and Shiraishi Neto to pose a research question: In the current legal context, can the social responsibility alleged by companies performing large-scale land acquisitions ensure equity in gender relations in the communities whose traditional territories were taken?

Harmony at the expense of justice. Using the concept of “coercive harmony” proposed by the US anthropologist Laura Nader, the authors find that Brazil’s current legal models prioritize harmony at the expense of justice, adopting the notion that negotiations should be the default behavior in a civilized world. The case of the babassu-breaker women shows that, in the current legal context that recognizes and promotes specific rights of peoples and traditional communities, if the women sought justice in maintaining their territories, the state would be obliged to guarantee them their rights. However, if women prioritize harmony, through negotiating with the company, the latter has greater bargaining power and advantages in so-called alternative conflict resolution, since coercive harmony can be repressive to groups with the least power, even without explicit conflict. Although MIQCB continues to oppose the company, men and women of affected communities may choose harmony because their struggles for traditional lands have lasted for almost two decades, beginning with the company that sold the lands to Suzano. Families now have scarce resources and energy to face such a powerful company.

Government cedes power to the market. The authors find that large-scale land acquisitions carried out according to market criteria of priority to the most profitable are defining the fate of traditional communities, despite their legally assured rights. The Brazilian government has chosen to subordinate its own intervention to that of the market. The market is no longer merely the site of supply and demand, but also the site of evaluation of governmental practices, giving the market power to define how the economic life of Brazilian society must run, regardless of justice. In the case of Suzano Paper and Pulp, the Brazilian government has opted for lesser state intervention, following the demands of the market for land destined to commodities production, and not following what is in the law, to uphold justice. The authors conclude that governments and societies that accept markets as the authority on how to define rights to land are the major drivers of gender inequality for traditional communities in the Amazon. On the one hand, the law has given traditional communities new rights. On the other hand, they are introduced into seemingly harmonious dialogues, in which whatever they say is limited by what is defined by the market.

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