

## Land Grabs, Power, and Gender in East and Southern Africa: So, What's New?

Ritu Verma



Land grabs have recently been the subject of considerable debate among media, development practitioners, and academics around the globe. Although these land deals affect the lives of millions of people in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is remarkable silence on the way land is negotiated in situations of intense change with respect to gender. For farmers and pastoralists, land has multiple values that go beyond its narrow definition as a commodity. Land has meanings inseparable from social and gender relations, economic welfare, well-being, cultural identity, spirituality, and symbolic significance. However, as powerful global forces and elite actors increasingly engage in land grabs, social justice, gender equity, environmental sustainability, and customary institutions are losing out to a narrow focus on resource extraction, external food security, and biofuel production based on the priorities of a few. As these new goals gain traction, women and men are being dispossessed of their land, livelihoods, and access to vitally important natural resources.

**Viewing land grabbing through a historical and gendered lens.** Ritu Verma critically examines local experiences of land grabbing through a historical and gendered lens. Reflecting on feminist political-ecological research undertaken on gender and land in Kenya, Mozambique, and Madagascar between 1997 and 2009, Verma provides windows into negotiations and contestations in processes of land grabs. Rather than superficially “adding women” to growing debates about land grabs, it is important to explore how gender, land, and global domains are mutually constituted (Mackenzie, 2010). This is done through prying away what might be new from ongoing patterns, as well as critically examining the role of elites and issues of scale. After investigating the land-grabbing phenomenon through the critical questions of what is arguably “new,” “foreign,” and “large scale” about it, the author found the following: first, some dispossessing forces are similar across time and place. They highlight historical continuities from the colonial past that persist in shaping how land grabs are played out. Second, local land grabs would not be possible without the involvement of local elites, thus highlighting elite- and male capture as enabling forces. Third, if we aggregate the everyday, gendered micro-political land grabs that have taken place across the continent over the past century, the sheer numbers are themselves large-scale.

**New players drive land grabs.** Verma also suggests that despite some continuities from the past, some trends are new. These include new actors from the South, including China, Korea, and the Gulf States, driving land grabs. Another is that economically powerful nations are seeking land to feed their own populations in other countries that are already food insecure. Also new is 1) the sheer scale and political-economic power of the transnational corporations responsible for land grabs, which defy the territorial boundaries in the nations where they are operating, the sovereignty of nation-states, and accountability; and 2) the alarming rate, speed, and intensity at which grabs are occurring. Contemporary land grabs have resulted from a perfect storm of financial, climate, energy, food, and development crises coming together with a powerful multiplier effect.

**Gendered power relations often override laws and rules.** Verma posits that land grabs mirror gender relations between and among women and men, whereby benefits are captured by those advantaged in terms of power and knowledge. The end result is the preservation of the status quo, and the increased concentration of wealth in the hands of a few powerful corporations, investors, and individuals. That land grabbing is occurring in, for instance, Mozambique, in spite of strong land laws and policies, illustrates the gendered power relations that are at play in bending the rules. Evidence suggests that both statutory authorities as well as customary leaders can be corrupted, coerced, or threatened into “consenting” to land grabs that affect communities they are supposed to represent and protect. The vast gap between policy and law and their fair and effective implementation requires urgent attention. Lastly, if constitutional, statutory laws and policies cannot prevent land grabs, it is doubtful that voluntary codes, principles, and guidelines put forward by international development organizations and banks will be able to defend the rights of economically poor women and men against the onslaught of land grabs. What is required is a set of enforceable and binding international regulations and legal mechanisms that places the rights of local women and men at their center.

Read the article in full at:

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