

Strategies to get gender onto the agenda of the “land grab” debate



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Executive summary

The International Land Coalition (ILC)'s Commercial Pressures on Land initiative aims to support the efforts of ILC members and other stakeholders to influence global, regional, and national processes to enable secure and equitable access to land for poor women and men in the face of increasing commercial demand. Its global research contains a careful and focused analysis of the gendered impacts of commercial pressures on land (CPL), and especially the impacts on women. This concludes that:

1. Women (and women's NGOs and CSOs) need to actively and strategically organise at all levels to get gender issues around CPL on the table of current and forthcoming processes on regulatory responses;
2. The gendered impacts of CPL need to be seriously addressed within this process in relation to all four aspects of women's vulnerability (systemic discrimination related to land access, ownership, and control; systemic discrimination related to decision-making; relative income poverty; and general physical vulnerability); and
3. Gender issues must not be subsumed within the broader debate on CPL.

Source note: This policy brief stems directly from the ILC's CPL initiative gender study, which reviews the literature on CPL to date and analyses the global research's country case studies from a gender perspective, and which includes a full list of all references reviewed and cited. See Daley, E. 2011. "Gendered impacts of commercial pressures on land". Rome: ILC.

Context and importance of the problem

Across Africa, Latin America, and Asia, land is a key productive and reproductive resource for the vast majority of rural women. Yet despite their tremendous contribution to agriculture and family food security, women across the world face systemic gender discrimination in terms of their access to, ownership of, and control of this key resource and the income that arises from its use.

Women's four-fold vulnerability

In the present global context of increasing commercial pressures on land (CPL), women are both likely to be affected differently to men by large-scale land deals and disproportionately more likely to be negatively affected than men because they are generally vulnerable as a group. This vulnerability is four-fold.

- First, it arises through the constraints and systemic discrimination that women generally face in relation to their access to, ownership of, and control of land, including the level of legal protection of their land rights.
- Second, women's vulnerability arises through the systemic discrimination they generally face in socio-cultural and political relations, most particularly in relation to their role in decision-making, and their ability to exercise freely both "voice" and "choice" in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.
- Third, women's vulnerability also arises through the more general state of their relative (cash) income poverty vis-à-vis men. It is not always easy to separate out women's relative income poverty from the discrimination they face in relation both to productive resources and to participation in decision-making, both of which contribute to poverty, but it is nonetheless a different dimension of their vulnerability.

Lessons from history on how changes in land relations affect women

Some of the currently proposed large-scale land deals are not unlike the large-scale rural development schemes involving technical change and new farming systems or practices that history tells us have often affected women in negative ways.

- Women have generally been disadvantaged by large-scale agricultural projects involving contract farming in Africa.
- Women's waged work has expanded with the growth of non-traditional agro-export production in Latin America, but women have had to overcome serious male opposition to their working outside the home.
- Women's land rights worldwide have been threatened by land tenure changes within large-scale rural development schemes and through classic land titling programmes.

- Fourth, and not least, it arises through women's general physical vulnerability vis-à-vis men, as manifested in direct gender-based and sexual violence against women.

Gender is uniquely the most central axis of differentiation and discrimination across all societies

The impacts of CPL on all vulnerable people is of utmost concern. However, it remains the case that across all developing countries, and all different socio-economic, political, historical, and environmental situations and circumstances, half the population – women – are generally vulnerable as a group. Gender is uniquely the

most central axis of differentiation and discrimination across all societies. Thus, although women face other forms of discrimination throughout the world (such as on grounds of race, class, age, etc.), these are everywhere added on top of the

underlying gender discrimination. This makes it imperative to analyse carefully the gendered impacts of contemporary CPL, and especially its impacts on women.

ILC Global Study case studies

At present there is a notable lack of specific information about – or indeed attention to – gender issues within the wider literature on CPL. There is overwhelming gender blindness and it is very difficult to get gender-disaggregated data on the “land grab” (see Daley 2011).

Yet, despite the limitations to the current literature, the ILC's global research includes numerous case studies which provide up-to-date information on the gendered impacts of CPL. Table 1 sets out some of the main findings from this new data set. Collectively these case studies make a significant contribution to the wider literature, providing much of the detail that has been lacking to date.

Table 1: Summary of ILC global research case study findings

Country	Main drivers of CPL	Main lands affected	Main aspects of women's vulnerability affected
Pakistan	Commercial agriculture (food for export)	Customary land – people's farms and grazing land	Productive resources (negative) Participation in decision-making (negative) Relative income poverty (negative) Physical (negative)
Ethiopia	Commercial agriculture (biofuels)	Common property – wetlands	Productive resources (negative) Participation in decision-making (negative) Relative income poverty (mixed/potentially positive)
Zambia	Biofuels (jatropha)	Mission land – informal farms	Productive resources (negative) Relative income poverty (negative)
Rwanda	Commercial agriculture (sugar cane)	Private state land – informal farms	Productive resources (mixed) Relative income poverty (mixed/potentially positive)
Nepal	Urbanisation, construction, and land speculation	Customary land – people's farms	Productive resources (mixed) Participation in decision-making (positive) Relative income poverty (mixed/potentially positive)
Philippines	Tourism and aquaculture	Common property – foreshores and mangroves	Productive resources (negative) Participation in decision-making (positive) Relative income poverty (negative)
Benin	Tourism, industry, and commerce	Customary land – people's farms	Productive resources (mixed) Physical (negative)
India	Special economic zones (SEZs)	People's farms	Productive resources (negative) Participation in decision-making (positive) Relative income poverty (negative)

Critique of policy options

The various international initiatives to establish a regulatory framework for investments in land and agriculture so far contain little from a gender perspective. With respect to their emphasis on improving the utilisation of so-called “reserve agricultural lands”, the regulatory approach of the international initiatives threatens the very fluid and non-formal rights that many women have to the productive resources on such “marginal” lands. Moreover, the international initiatives tend to see formal property rights as part of the solution to risk mitigation, without due acknowledgement of all the issues that are raised for women in particular by processes of property rights formalisation. In addition, the emphasis within the international initiatives on involving local communities in negotiations and decision-making does not in itself address many of the longstanding concerns of feminist activists about the dynamics of both gender and power relations at the local level.

Several initiatives are currently on the table to explore possible regulatory frameworks and there is a consensus that some practical measures can and should be developed and supported. However, there is a real dilemma for some stakeholders, and particularly for civil society activists, in deciding how (or indeed whether) to engage with these initiatives when the perspectives of those taking part may be highly divergent. This dilemma is particularly acute for women’s groups, who also have to decide how to engage with other civil society groups within the broader coalition.

The struggle for gender equality has a long history and women’s rights have almost always been considered alien and inappropriate wherever the battle for them has begun

It seems clear that there is an opportunity through participatory processes – such as for instance the ILC dialogue – to address gender issues across the board via the development of targeted tools and procedures. On the other hand, local contexts also need to be considered; where there is entrenched socio-cultural and political discrimination against women, and where they do not participate fully in decision-making, there is a risk that poorly-

designed and over-simplistic “gender-sensitive” tools could be seen as harbingers of unwelcome foreign norms and end up being discarded as inappropriate to the local context. Yet the struggle for gender equality has a long history, and women’s rights have almost always been considered alien and inappropriate wherever the battle for them has begun.

There are thus important questions about how the gendered impacts of CPL should be addressed within the overall set of regulatory proposals, and about how CSOs, NGOs, and women’s organisations in particular should strategise over how best to respond. There are important parallels with, and lessons to be learned from, the experience of women’s NGOs during the 1990s land tenure reform debates in Tanzania, where women’s groups were split between those

What women need

When asked what it is that the women really need, Kooya does not hesitate. “We need our voices to be heard at different levels, by our own government but also by networks of women around the world who will support us. We are being marginalised by our government but also by the men in our communities – and yet we women are the majority in our communities. We need a big movement to hold government accountable.”

Indeed, “technological and financial solutions” to the problems and risks to women farmers from CPL and large-scale land acquisition and investment may be secondary:

“The core solutions lie in building alliances, supporting dialogue and solidarity across local and international borders and enabling women to determine their choices, their priorities, their ways of ‘doing and being’ to hold local governments accountable.”

Source: Tandon, N. 2010. “Land investments are wholesale sell-outs for women farmers”, *Pambazuka News*, 3 June 2010. Issue 484

who wanted to line up alongside the rest of civil society to tackle broader “class” issues as a united front, and those who wanted to advocate for women’s issues directly, so as to ensure that they were not marginalised within the broader struggle. Whether and how women benefit from or are negatively affected by individual land deals depends on their starting socio-economic position and status – as for men – and thus many of the issues for particular women are also those that affect the poor and disadvantaged in general. Yet it remains the case that in the current global context of increasing CPL, women as a group are both likely to be affected differently from men and disproportionately more likely to be negatively affected than men because they are generally vulnerable as a group.

Policy recommendations

To an extent, much of what is needed in addressing women’s four-fold vulnerability is a good dose of pragmatism. Tools and procedures must be locally appropriate and not over-generalised if they are to be of any value to women. They must also specifically address all four aspects of women’s vulnerability in relation to the impacts on them of CPL.

1. Productive resources

Measures to support women’s land rights clearly make sense, but this is also beneficial for all people with weak land rights, including indigenous peoples and communities relying on land tenure practices based around “customary”

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rights and common property resources. Support for women's land rights is likely to enable them to obtain higher wages in any employment generated by large-scale land deals, because land ownership, and the opportunity cost of not spending time working in their own fields, increases their bargaining power in the labour market. Land ownership is also likely to increase the possibilities for women to engage in contract farming or similar arrangements with large-scale investors.

2. Participation in decision-making

Measures to support increasing levels of participation and decision-making by women in relation to consultations on individual proposals for large-scale land deals will assist in improving the overall level of community engagement and consultation. The threat of land loss can be a trigger

The threat of land loss can be a trigger for women's empowerment and political engagement within their communities

for women's empowerment and political engagement within their communities, whereby some women come to exercise leadership on behalf of all vulnerable people. Yet where there are substantial socio-cultural and political obstacles to women's engagement, it can still be very difficult to involve women in research or community consultations on proposed deals.

3. Relative income poverty

Measures to support and protect poor people also make sense from a gender perspective. For such measures to be especially beneficial to women, however, they need to recognise and support women's specific concerns. Companies themselves can be encouraged to look for ways to make it easier for women to take up any employment opportunities presented by large-scale land deals, e.g. by developing "family-friendly" policies and practices, including for employment opportunities in commercial industry or agricultural processing.

4. Physical vulnerability

Increasing overall poverty combined with livelihoods shifts in favour of women, i.e. which strengthen women's economic position within the household, has often been associated with increased levels of violence against women. Therefore, tools and procedures to facilitate greater benefits for women from large-scale land deals must not do so at the expense of equitable development for both women and men.

Directing future research

To help guide such equitable development through large-scale land deals, it is necessary to base on solid evidence the gender-sensitive tools, procedures, and measures that must now be part of the scope of work of the various international regulatory initiatives. This makes it important to get gender consistently included on the agenda of all future research projects on large-scale land acquisitions and CPL, and to avoid gender fatigue by consistently emphasising the imperative to do so.

Measures to support women's voice

- Working through existing women-only forums, whether "customary" or government-sponsored;
- Developing and strengthening channels of interaction between women-only forums and other community-level political institutions;
- Broader gender sensitisation and capacity-building work.

It should be possible to elaborate a gender research tool – a checklist of issues for women – to be incorporated within the developing regulatory frameworks and which all researchers of large-scale land deals could be encouraged to utilise in their research by way of best practice.

A broader strategy

While working to ensure positive outcomes for women, despite the substantive systemic gender discrimination they face and the four-fold vulnerability that they contend with vis-à-vis men, it will be especially important for women's organisations not to subsume gender issues "for the greater good". Most often, these issues will most effectively be addressed if they are specifically put on the table at the outset.

Activists concerned about the impact of CPL on women must also not just focus on specific policies around CPL and on the development of gender-sensitive tools, procedures, and measures. They must also remember to cast their net more widely and ensure coordinated action with the whole range of women's groups within civil society who are working to achieve improvements in women's representation and participation in decision-making at all levels of governance.

Therefore, in sum:

- Women now need to actively and strategically organise at all levels to get gender issues around CPL on the table of any regulatory dialogue process at the outset.
- The gendered impacts of CPL in relation to all four aspects of women's vulnerability need to be seriously addressed within these processes, especially through the development of locally appropriate and gender-sensitive tools, procedures, and measures.
- Gender issues must not be subsumed within the broader debate.

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This policy brief is derived from a wider initiative on Commercial Pressures on Land (CPL). If you would like further information on the initiative and on the collaborating partners, please contact the Secretariat of the International Land Coalition or visit www.landcoalition.org/cpl.

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