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To cite this article: Vanessa Lamb, Laura Schoenberger, Carl Middleton & Borin Un (2017): Gendered eviction, protest and recovery: a feminist political ecology engagement with land grabbing in rural Cambodia, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2017.1311868](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1311868)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1311868>



Published online: 11 Jun 2017.



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## Gendered eviction, protest and recovery: a feminist political ecology engagement with land grabbing in rural Cambodia

Vanessa Lamb , Laura Schoenberger, Carl Middleton  and Borin Un

We examine what we argue has been overlooked in the Cambodian context: the roles and practices of women in relation to men and their complementary struggles to protest land grabbing and eviction, and subsequently rebuild community and state relations. We present research carried out in Cambodia in 2014–2015 in Kratie, the country's most concessioned province. Through a feminist political ecology lens, we examine how protest and post-eviction community governance are defined as women's or men's work. Our case also reveals how 'rebuilding' gender relations in rural Cambodia simultaneously rebuilds uneven community and state relations.

**Keywords:** gender; land grab; eviction; Cambodia; Southeast Asia; state-gender relations

### Introduction

Alongside the dramatic rise of large-scale economic land concessions (ELCs) and acquisitions, termed the global 'land grab' (Baird 2014; GRAIN 2008), academics and civil society organizations have documented profound social, economic and political transformations and impacts on resource users (e.g. White et al. 2012; Peluso and Lund 2011). Yet how gender matters to the global land grab is noted as one of two main 'silences' of the land grab literature (Hall et al. 2015, 482) even as Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing (2012, 73) argue that 'The available evidence thus far indicates that large-scale land deals have tended to overlook the rights, needs, and interests of women and as a result have tended to aggravate gender inequalities in affected communities'. If we turn to Cambodia, arguably an epicenter of the dramatic rise of land grabbing,<sup>1</sup> the focus on women in land-grab scholarship is perhaps an exception. Since the 2008 emergence of 'land grabbing' (Baird 2014), a number of insightful and timely studies have considered the negative impacts of land grabbing and eviction on women in Cambodia (LICADHO 2015a; Kusakabe 2015; Park 2015; Brickell 2014; McGinn 2013; COHRE 2011; Mehrak, Chhay, and My 2008).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An independent estimate from the NGO LICADHO shows that more than 2.1 million hectares has been granted to ELCs in Cambodia (LICADHO 2015b).

<sup>2</sup>As evidence of the focus on women as gender, many of these reference women directly in their titles; examples include *Cambodia's Women in Land Conflict* (CCHR 2016) and Brickell's (2014) study "'The whole world is watching": intimate geopolitics of forced eviction and women's activism in Cambodia'.

This essential work provides insight into the serious impacts of urban eviction on women (McGinn 2013; SKO 2013), as well as the role of women protesting urban eviction (Brickell 2014). It has also contributed to the broader land grab literature by revealing the negative impacts of eviction on women, and women's uneven access to land and formal political representation. Building on this work, we examine a case of gendered rural eviction, protest, and subsequent community (and state) rebuilding in Khsem commune, Kratie province. We examine what we argue has been overlooked in the Cambodian context: the roles and practices of women *in relation to men* and their complementary struggles to protest, and later rebuild their community, in the wake of eviction. We also show how, through the rebuilding of post-eviction social life, uneven gendered relations as directly linked to the state and to the land are rebuilt.

We carried out this research in two parts over 1.5 years. The initial field visit was linked to a research consultancy on gender and land access for an international non-government organization (NGO) working on land rights and poverty. During a second visit, one year later, we followed up with key interviewees about the community's rebuilding process. The research site in Khsem is located in the country's northeast frontier of Kratie province. Kratie has undergone large-scale transformation related to ELCs. Attesting to this change, Kratie, formerly the most forested province, is currently the country's most concessioned province (MAFF 2014a).<sup>3</sup> Our research into the Khsem case began after the community's eviction as result of a conflict with a company holding an ELC, and our insights are drawn from what transpired post-eviction, with a focus on the rebuilding of the community.

Drawing on data generated from fieldwork, we demonstrate two key points. First, by highlighting the gendered responses and changes by women *alongside and in relation to the emerging practices of men* in the post-eviction circumstances, we show an evolving gender division which saw first women and then men take lead roles. This could or would go unnoticed if we focused only on the impacts on women. This case also provides insights into these divisions under conditions of community reconstruction, as, uniquely, after the women-led protests, this community obtained a Social Land Concession (SLC) allowing them to retain access to their land. SLCs are considered 'land concessions for the people' and constitute the main pillar of land distribution under Cambodia's 2001 Land Law.<sup>4</sup> At present, however, very little is documented about the establishment of SLCs, their impacts and their relationship to gender relations in rural Cambodia, even as the state's depiction names 'women' as a group of special concern for an SLC.<sup>5</sup>

Second, we abstract these findings to suggest that land grabbing and eviction processes offer the grounds for rebuilding and re-inscribing uneven gender–state–environment relations post-eviction. To link the rebuilding of gender to state and land, we draw on work in feminist political ecology, and Das' work (2004) on the role of the modern state

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<sup>3</sup>The Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries numbers do not include concessions granted by the Ministry of Environment (MoE) within their territories (protected areas, wildlife sanctuaries, etc.). MoE began granting concessions in 2011, but this information was not publicly available at the time of research.

<sup>4</sup>The 2003 Sub-decree on Social Land Concessions states that in addition to targeting the poor and landless, SLCs may also be granted to families who have been displaced by public infrastructure development or affected by natural disasters; demobilized soldiers and families of soldiers who were disabled or died in the line of duty; facilitating economic development; and facilitating ELC by providing land to workers of large plantations (Article 16).

<sup>5</sup>As Neef et al. explain, 'SLC land provides secure use rights and gives special attention to women and the disadvantaged' (2013, 1100).

in a frontier. Bringing these literatures together, as we do in the next section, allows us to conceptualize the eviction of the people in this Cambodian frontier as part of the state 'rebuilding' process which, we demonstrate, is simultaneously a rebuilding of gender relations.

In approaching this study, we understand that there is much at stake. We agree with others in this collection that a gender perspective matters to the way that land grabbing impacts, unfolds, and works to marginalize the most vulnerable. That gender matters in understanding not only the uneven impacts, but also the uneven benefits, of such land transformations is essential in understanding what is at stake in the Khsem case and in Cambodia. There are also potential transformations of land and land access that could create positive new opportunities for women, but if land deals and grabs continue to 'take resources away from women [they] can reduce the welfare of women and their families, even if there are some income gains to men' (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012, 51–52). This is important for our case where post-eviction and post-protest governance of the SLC has emerged principally as 'men's work', even as it is defined by the state as land redistribution for the poor and vulnerable, including women. It is important to study both men and women to document such complementary changes.

Moreover, as the current literature on land grabbing and gender in Cambodia is primarily focused on women,<sup>6</sup> we are concerned that such a focus overlooks relational change and risks misdefining aspects of the land grab and eviction as a 'women's problem'.<sup>7</sup> As Morgan (2017, 2) explains in her examination of women in protest in Indonesia against plantation expansion,

While rarely discussed in the literature until now, gender is increasingly understood as one of the key axes of differentiation affecting the distribution of opportunities and costs from large-scale land acquisitions. Yet discussions on the relationship between social differentiation and large-scale acquisitions rarely extend beyond identifying who is most vulnerable or victimized to consider the ways in which differentially located people exercise agency and shape their futures vis-à-vis land.

One of the ways that we propose complicating the analysis of social differentiation is to extend beyond identifying 'women as gender' or women as the most vulnerable, to also understand how such positioning of 'women' may influence subsequent roles for women in political action in informal and formal spheres, such as how participation in protest may link to governance roles both during the protest and subsequent to it, and also to understand how women and men's relations to the state and land are made in relation to one another.

Before we examine the details of the case of gender and land in Cambodia, we first present our conceptual and methodological approach.

### **Conceptual approach**

To understand the processes of 'rebuilding' gender, we draw on feminist political ecology scholarship. This is important because such an approach understands that gender is not

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<sup>6</sup>See also Ikeya's (2014) argument that gender scholars in Asia and Southeast Asia focus on 'women as gender'.

<sup>7</sup>In turn, this unintentionally risks mirroring what has been shown in development studies as placing the burden for change on women (Schroeder 1999; Gururani 2002).

fixed, even as it may have enduring performances. Recent work in feminist political ecology (Elmhirst 2011; Nightingale 2006) draws on post-structuralist understandings of gender, which provides insight into how gender is understood as a process or performance, one that is dynamic and intersectional, and that cannot be disentangled from our concepts of nature and land. This work emphasizes that gender ‘does not refer to women or to differences between men and women. Rather, gender is the process through which differences based on presumed biological sex are defined, imagined, and become significant in specific contexts’ (Nightingale 2006, 171). Moreover, in approaching gender as a process, ‘the dynamic relationship between gender, environment, and other aspects of social and cultural life can be brought into view’ (Nightingale 2006, 165).

Bringing this approach to gender and land into relationship with the state’s role, we turn to Das’ work on the modern state in a frontier zone, and its ‘refounding’. Das explains that ‘at the margins’, like at Khsem, we can best understand ‘the authority of the state as literalized in everyday contexts’ (Das 2004, 225). Following Das and Poole, the state’s eviction and disavowal of residents alters the community’s relations to land and state. As such, eviction may be an integral part of the state-making process, where ‘the state is imagined as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of – and imagined – through an invocation of the wildness, lawlessness and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within’, and thus people on the margins are caught up in this tension between the desired and undesired ‘inside’ (Das 2004, 7; see also McCreary and Lamb 2014, 618). This state project, then, is not an outcome or authority that is taken for granted, but instead it requires continual processes of re-articulation and rebuilding, and bringing the undesired, the wild and the lawless within the state’s domain.

Building on this work, we invoke the term ‘rebuilding’ to examine the intersection of gender–state–land in principally two ways. First, in invoking rebuilding (rather than simply ‘building’), we recognize the violent eviction of the community to be the state’s work to deny rights in this case of eviction; in a sense, we can emphasize that/how the state’s violent eviction matters to – but does not necessarily define – these relationships. Following Das’ work (2004; Das and Poole 2004), we emphasize the rebuilding of the community and state through the responses to eviction, linked to establishing ‘refounding order’ over land and community ‘at the margins’. Second, we expand on this literature to consider the ways in which rebuilding entails the continual work and processes of performing gender, as understood in critical feminist political ecology scholarship. This provides insight into how gender is operationalized in different contexts and can deepen understanding of the relations between gender, land and state. Our ensuing examination of the intersections of gender, land and state emphasizes the incomplete project of rebuilding the state and gender together, both in and through relationships with land.

## **Methods**

Our research team (inclusive of the first, second and fourth authors) and one research assistant carried out fieldwork in late July and early August 2014, with one follow-up trip in June 2015. All names referenced here are pseudonyms and interviews are numbered and referenced according to the sequential number and date of interview.

In 2014, the research team conducted 28 household interviews with community members, including both women and men, and Khmer and indigenous Stieng peoples. Our field research, including our visit to Khsem, interviews and group-focus discussions, was carried out *after* the community was evicted and protested, and shortly after they had been awarded their SLC. With community leaders (n = 7) we held focused discussion

and conducted group mapping exercises, as well as holding two public meetings and group discussions (n = 238). We also held key informant interviews with community representatives and activists, and NGO staff both active in the case and working on land claims in the area more broadly (n = 7). What is missing from this data set, however, are observations by the research team of land use and livelihoods that existed prior to eviction, since fields and homes were, for the most part, already destroyed by the time of our research.

The initial focus of our research, shaped by our research consultancy, meant that of our 28 household interviews, the majority (20/28) were women. A focus on telling women's stories is not necessarily 'wrong', but it does tend to rely on a set of assumptions which we are concerned can overlook relational change between men and women (as a way to understand gender), which was important in this case. To address this point, we drew upon our research data that was more gender diverse (more equally split between men and women), such as interviews with the village committee, all of whom were men at the time of our field visit, the residents we met in two public meetings, residents in group discussions, and key NGO informants. We then expanded the data through targeted follow-up interviews conducted in June 2015, after the consultancy work was complete.

The authors also reviewed documentation of the case, including multiple written exchanges, requests and petitions between the community and government at commune, district, provincial and national levels, as well as letters targeting embassies and other institutions, and published media accounts and background documents provided by NGOs. Thus, the arguments presented in this paper draw on data generated through fieldwork and review of documents, as well as a review of literature related to gender and land. We now examine some of that literature on Cambodia, as a transition into the case of eviction in Khsem.

### Representing gender and land

In present-day Cambodia, there exists a friction between gender roles or codes for women that are understood to be 'traditional' with the contemporary designs for improving women's lives and reducing gender inequality (Brickell 2011). This stems from the codes of conduct which exist for Khmer women and men, namely *chbap srey* and *chbap broh* respectively (Kent 2011; Ledgerwood 1994). The two texts set out complementary positioning of women's bodies, with women instructed to protect their bodies, while men are tasked with the work of protection and governance (of, for instance, women's bodies). This presents a hierarchical relationship, with men situated above women. As Gorman, Dorina, and Kheng (1999, 10) emphasize, 'In general, women are considered to be of lower status than men of the same socio-economic background', which is not limited to Cambodia, but is certainly significant for our case.

We see these gendered hierarchies mirrored in governing and governance across Cambodia, where governing has largely been the work of men. At the national level, men make up 80 percent of the National Assembly as of the 2013 National Election. This most recent election also brought in an era in which all Senior Ministers are men, and 93 percent of the other ministerial positions are held by men – a proportion that has been unchanged since 1998 (CCHR 2013). At the sub-national level, men make up 87 percent of district and provincial councillors (Kuch 2014). At the commune level, men hold 82 percent of the 16,000 positions of commune councillors and 94 percent of the seats for commune chiefs (Kuch 2014; Comfrel 2012). Getting closer to the ground, 97 percent of village chiefs are men (Comfrel 2011). Central in feminist critiques of the Cambodian state is women's unequal access to political power; Frieson (2001, 2) reminds us 'the gendering of the state and

social forces within it produce unequal power relations between women and men'. In our analysis, we extend consideration of how the work of governing has been gendered, to that of administering and ordering new forms of territory and land access.

Low literacy levels among women are a reported reason why women are less likely to have knowledge of land titles (Frieson 2011), which is also important to our study in terms of how the tasks of community governance and administration in Khsem were gendered. Recent research on women's experiences of land registration has further found that women are perceived to have less knowledge than men about plot sizes, legal tenure requirements and the new Land Law. Frieson (2011, 186) explains that, 'although this stems in part from their lower literacy levels, it is also partly because of the social stigma attached to women engaging directly and equally with men in matters requiring access to local authorities and legal matters', underscoring the importance of gender in the interface between local officials, community representatives and households (see also Mehrak, Chhay, and My 2008; Lilja 2008). Recent academic research has also provided insights into the differential impacts of these constraints in relation to land laws and women, particularly as related to women's participation in mobilizations to protest urban eviction (Brickell 2014; McGinn 2013; Kent 2016).

These insights also link with work outside Cambodia, such as Morgan's insights into what conditions lead to participation in public protests around land by examining women's 'unlikely' roles in protesting oil palm expansion in Indonesia (forthcoming; see also Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000). Morgan interviewed a diverse set of female protesters, finding that 'Many chose to mobilize these gendered roles in protest motivation even though by doing so they risked reinforcing the unequal gendered positions that often exclude them from politics in the first place' (forthcoming, 7). The unintentional reinforcement of uneven power relations is also important to our case. As Kent (2016, 19–20) illustrates in the well-documented Cambodian case of Boeung Kak Lake (BKL), many women-led protests are portrayed as 'resisting' traditional gender roles and increasing women's 'empowerment', but there are also reasons why men have avoided joining protests. These include fear of repercussions in their employment or status at work as government officers, alongside concerns with avoiding state violence, which are complicated when their employer is the same government carrying out the evictions. Our study across eviction, protest and post-eviction rebuilding allows us to explore the evolving role of women (in relation to men), including women's leading role in the women-fronted protest following eviction, through to the post-eviction period where rebuilding the community became defined as predominantly 'men's work'.

### **The case of Khsem community, and the production of gender in the aftermath of eviction**

To introduce the Khsem community, we first lay out the geographical context and process of the community's establishment, proceeding to the community's eviction and post-eviction protest before finally turning to the creation of the SLC 'win' and its governance. After presenting the case, we consider the overall implications of the case study in terms of rebuilding the state and gender, and offer some conclusions and directions for future research.

Khsem commune, located in northeastern Cambodia's Kratie province, is an area of multiple high-profile evictions and an extraordinary number of land concessions (MAFF 2014a). As the head of a rights-based NGO explained, 'Kratie is the province that suffers the most from land concessions, and authorities have no solution for villagers

who lost their land' (Narim 2011). At the time of our first field visit in July 2014, the residents of Khsem commune had experienced a violent eviction just months earlier. This community was evicted in March 2013 and again in April 2014, which saw destruction of homes and cropland, in an area that a Vietnamese rubber company claimed to be within its land concession. Just days after their houses were destroyed, the community traveled to Phnom Penh to protest as a way to ask the Provincial Governor for help, and more specifically for an SLC. SLCs are meant to help Cambodia's landless or land poor and can eventually be converted into full private ownership with land title.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the eviction, in April 2014, none of the families held a land title and previous attempts to receive formal recognition of their land had not succeeded.<sup>9</sup> They, like many previously evicted communities mobilizing around land evictions in Cambodia, set up in a temple in the city, Wat Samakki Rainsey.

Prior to the eviction, since 2012, the community had been struggling over the encroachment by the Vietnamese-owned Binh Phuoc II rubber plantation. Complicating the community's relationship to the company, many residents are day laborers on the plantation, and came to this area for work, often in logging or on the plantation. They have also planted cassava and other crops on plots they cleared. The majority of those we interviewed, with the exception of people who identified as indigenous Stieng, moved to Khsem from elsewhere, mostly Kampong Cham, but also Prey Veng, Svay Rieng and the newly formed Thboung Khmum province. Many of these households migrated via networks of family members, who became familiar with the area after the upgrading of the national road through the Snuol Wildlife Sanctuary and the subsequent expansion of logging opportunities in the region.

In terms of livelihoods, all 28 households we interviewed, whether Khmer or Stieng, centered their livelihoods on household-scale cassava production. There was very little crop diversification, except for several Stieng households' cultivation of small plots of inter-cropped upland rice. Nearly all the families we interviewed did not grow enough rice to last the year. For migrant families from other provinces, some also had limited access to small plots of farming land in their home villages, which they split their time between, following the agricultural seasons in Khsem. However, the majority of villagers we spoke with had no land in their homeland, underscoring the importance of their settlement in Khsem.

In terms of gendered roles in the community prior to the eviction, we have limited primary data to work with as we visited the community after the eviction had occurred. During our research, men and women were working together to cultivate their land. In an attempt to make legible claims on the land, many husbands and wives had previously worked together to clear land and plant cassava in what was a forested, but not unpopulated, area. They also established a homestead and built a rainwater-harvesting system to secure access to water. However, these efforts to make their spaces more legible<sup>10</sup> were at times

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<sup>8</sup>Implementation of SLCs has received skepticism (Neef, Touch, and Chienthong 2013; LICADHO 2015c).

<sup>9</sup>The closest Khsem came to receiving a formal land title was during the Prime Minister's Order 01 land-titling campaign that targeted state forests, and areas near ELCs and forest concessions. In December 2012, 186 families applied to the commune authorities requesting that the youth volunteers working to measure land as part of the campaign come to measure their land. The youth volunteers never came.

<sup>10</sup>By legibility we refer to two linked processes. The first, clearing land and planting crops, is a visible claim to neighbors, local officials and/or an encroaching company of their right to use the land. This

fragmented and incomplete, as they were also waiting to find out where their plots would be in the SLC before investing in the land and upgrading the homes from tarpaulin walls to more durable structures. Both men and women worked in the plantations, for the company, and on their own fields, but working in logging was men's work, albeit with women playing a supporting role by carrying petrol for the power saw, for example (Interviewee 21, July 2014). Many also travel for wage labor in their hometowns.

That the village, the farmlands and the plantation are located in and around the Snuol Wildlife Sanctuary is important for understanding this case, and complicates the community's claim to the land. Consistent with maps of ELCs (see [OpenDevelopmentCambodia.net](http://OpenDevelopmentCambodia.net)), we observed that expansive tracts of land have been cleared within the sanctuary for planting rubber and cassava. This has mostly been carried out by logging syndicates and ELCs, but more recently, villagers seeking to claim the land they farm, or plan to farm, has resulted in them clearing land and quickly planting cash crops, like cassava, to make their claims legible.

Key to this large-scale land transformation – the granting of ELCs and high rates of deforestation – was the upgrading of a former logging road through the Wildlife Sanctuary to an all-season National Road in 2008. Improved road access facilitated the expansion of company activities and also the in-roads made by migrating smallholder farmers. Additionally, also starting in 2008, the Ministry of Environment began reclassifying state public land as state private land, thus allowing granting the land as ELCs. Within just five years, more than 70 percent of the protected area was granted to eight companies (Boyle and Titthara 2013). Images from Landsat satellites taken between 2009 and 2013 confirm that these companies logged about 60 percent of the sanctuary's forest (Boyle and Titthara 2013). As logging activities expanded and investors rushed in, a land rush by landless and land-poor families from neighboring Kampong Cham province, along with Svay Rieng, began as well. Indeed, before 2008 the area was considered remote and was mostly swidden farming land for indigenous Stieng people in the area, highlighting just how drastic the scale of change has been.

The above means that Khsem is a relatively new community in multiple senses. It also relates to the history of land (re)allocation in Cambodia. The community's successive experiences of landlessness underscore the country's history of violence and conflict, as a number of household heads now in their 30s and 40s lost their parents to the Khmer Rouge and as orphans did not receive land in the 1980s during Cambodia's post-collectivization land redistribution program.<sup>11</sup> When we asked residents about their reasons for settling in the case study area, all replied that they were either landless or land poor in their home village and came to Khsem for work and to claim land. This underlines the importance of their land in Khsem.

### **Eviction and protest: increasing the visibility and roles of women**

The company's encroachment culminated in violent evictions that saw hundreds of houses razed and burned in March 2013 and again in April 2014. The April 2014 eviction alone resulted in the burning and destruction of 266 homes and nearby croplands by private

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form of claim-making is pre-condition to a second form of legibility achieved by appearing in the central cadastral system through processes like the Order 01 titling campaign (Scott 1998).

<sup>11</sup>Notably, the indigenous Stieng families were also displaced during the Khmer Rouge period and had re-settled two to three times before arriving to reside in Khsem.

and public security forces under the direction of multiple authorities at the sub-national level.

We cannot emphasize enough the impact on the Khsem community of the violent evictions enacted by state authorities in conjunction with the company. The security force that evicted the community and the government officials they negotiated with were all men, as is the case across Cambodia. As the burgeoning work on the gendered impact of eviction in Cambodia shows, forced eviction from the home has serious, long-term impacts (McGinn 2015). House burning, as seen in this case, is particularly significant; as one Khmer woman who was planting cassava noted, 'it sends a message, we all know people and authorities alike could use that wood' (Interviewee 34, June 2015).

In Khsem, community members emphasized the impacts of eviction and the burning and razing of houses in each interview. Boupaha, a mother of four young children, described the 2014 eviction scene as follows:

They took the rice even – they destroyed it, they spilled it out. They took the tools, like the axe, they took the axe. They took the boards to my house too, if it was a good board. Who was it? I just know it was the Binh Phuoc II company. There was no warning. They just came and burned it. What could I do? Just watch it burn. My husband was angrier than me, but the men needed to run away because we were afraid the men would be caught. The military shot in the air to threaten us. The men had to escape into the forest. (Interview 12, August 2014)

As Boupaha notes above, the impacts of eviction were traumatic, and women and men reacted differently. Not only did she see her husband display anger more visibly, but the family believed he had to flee to the forest to escape the threat of violent retaliation for his response to the military. Som, a Khmer women in her 30s, told us, 'I noticed the impact of the ELC on the men. After the houses were destroyed, the men were not allowed to go into the village. Only women are allowed to come in and collect belongings' (Interviewee 9, July 2014).

As Som and Boupaha suggest, women and men worked differently during the eviction and post-eviction protest period. When responding to eviction, families wanted to avoid any possible violent retaliation. The men fled or 'were asked to flee for their safety by their wives' while the women felt that they could stay and observe what their evictors did, without eliciting violent reaction. Following the forced evictions, women told us they were informed by the authorities present that they could collect their belongings from the rubble 'quickly' but that men would be shot if they tried to do the same. We were informed that men were being more closely monitored by the police – especially in terms of going in and out of the community – after the evictions. Central to the perceived need for men to flee into the forest is that the forces conducting the burning and razing of homes were all men, and these encounters were necessarily gendered as consequence, with women now bolstered to face their male evictors on behalf of the family.

In May and June 2014, after the literal dust and ash of the eviction had settled, the gendering of responses expanded further as the community launched a series of marches led by women throughout the capital city. This organized community also worked at multiple scales, from blocking national roads locally in their home district, to petitioning embassies and the Cambodian Red Cross in Phnom Penh, attracting national headlines. In our discussions with residents about the protests, their narrations were full of excitement, while also acknowledging the risks. A young woman in her early 20s animatedly explained, 'If you do not do anything, then you cannot win. If communities meet a land problem, they must protest to get the land back. They must work hard together!' (July 2014). Responding to

our inquiries about the future, and whether the women would go to Phnom Penh to protest again, the response from Nuon, like that of many others, was ‘Yes, we will go’, with a big smile (Interviewee 20, July 2014). Women’s comments about the protests were in line with that of the director of the NGO LICADHO, which is responsible for many of the high-profile reports on land grabbing in Cambodia, that ‘Women activists, particularly those who lead their communities, have gone beyond the traditional role assigned to Cambodian women of caring for the home and the family’ (Wight 2015).

When we asked women directly about their roles, we were also told about the difficulties and strategic positioning. For instance, one woman who participated in the Phnom Penh protests explained that ‘I have to cry and yell in the protest things like ... “Kratie Provincial Governor please help me because now, no house, no pot, no plate, nothing! Please help now!”’ (Interviewee 21, July 2014). Srey Mom, a local organizer speaking about the role of men and women, explained that ‘Women are more emotional; they could cry, shout, show the difficulty they face better than men do’ (Interviewee 36, June 2015). Srey Mom further explained that ‘the authorities pay less attention in terms of taking action or responding to the women’, and thus this is seen to reduce the likelihood of violence. This positioning of ‘women at the front’ was strategic. Considering how male bodies were being policed, and the very heated role that men were seen as playing during the evictions, it is not surprising that women continued to play a greater role in public protest, especially because it required travel and encounters with state security forces.

Srey Mom, in a follow-up interview, reiterated that the impacts of eviction and increased policing of land were felt differently by men than by women:

Men had to protect themselves from being arrested ... [In this case] it was mostly women who took action because when men protested or challenged strongly, authorities often fought them or arrested them. You can see in many cases, men were arrested ... In the protest, the reason women are at the front line is because they think that if men are at the front line, it might be easy to provoke the situation or cause violence. The protestors believed that men can’t protest strongly as women did; if they did, men could be caught or arrested. If men challenged authorities, it could more easily result in violence. (Interview 36, June 2015)

Srey Mom links the impacts of the eviction, and the enhanced role of women in protest, with women’s enhanced roles vis-à-vis men to reduce violence. Like Khsem, in the case of BKL of Phnom Penh, Brickell (2014, 1257) explains that ‘Community members of both genders initially conceived of women’s leadership as a means to maximize the associational value of Khmer women to peace ... as a way to minimize the potential for (male) violence and reduce disruption to men’s income earning’. Emphasizing the departure from traditional gender roles, one of the BKL group’s leaders said, ‘We can do more than take our husband’s clothes, wash them, and hang them’ (Brickell 2014, 1257). In both cases, women’s roles are described as exciting and fighting for justice (see also, Sethi 2013, Wight 2015). They simultaneously recognize it is a challenge not without risk.

For Khsem residents, some of the challenges included the distance to travel to protest in Phnom Penh, also necessitating re-arranging home and livelihood activities within their whole family. In interviews with women and families who had participated in the protests, we were also told of the multifaceted struggles faced by the entire family to work together to participate in protest while making ends meet. It is significant that in addition to work at the individual or community level, the whole family had to organize and coordinate their activities over an extended period, and sometimes great distances, to be able to protest, which further drew out the gendered divisions of labor in the household. Consider the case of Kunthea and her family (Interviewee 1, July 2014). The eviction was difficult for her in

many ways; she told us that ‘When the company came to burn my house, they burned my clothes, they burned my ID card. We knew each other since I worked at the company and I know their faces’ (Interviewee 1, July 2014). Kunthea has resided in Khsem since 2009, and works for the rubber plantation, earning 20,000 riel (USD 5) per day. Kunthea, as a mother of a family of four, migrated from Kampong Cham where neither she nor her husband had any land. She came to the area for work at the plantation, and upon arrival made a living clearing the forest, and collecting wood and other products from the forest. Her family established a plot of land of around two hectares, on which she and her husband worked together to plant corn and cassava. After the eviction, the family decided to participate in the protest in Phnom Penh, but in order to do so Kunthea and her husband had to share child care responsibility; sometimes this meant sending their daughters to Kampong Cham, highlighting the way that gendered participation in protest was negotiated in relation to other roles.

### **The SLC: an ending to the protest and a start to rebuilding**

Ultimately, the community gained land rights and had their land access restored in the form of an SLC in 2014. This was seen as quite a remarkable outcome for residents. As one participant emphasized in group discussion, ‘We are an example for others!’ (July 2014). However, initially, in response to their requests, the provincial government offered an SLC in another, unspecified district (Pheap 2014). To redress this, Khsem protesters promptly responded with a list of seven demands which included that they be resettled on the same land and not be displaced to other areas. The following day, the Kratie Governor allotted a 750-hectare SLC to an unspecified number of families, ambiguously referred to as ‘the protestors that stay in Wat Samakki Raignsey’. The offer was contingent on them ending their protest, and returning immediately to sign documentation.<sup>12</sup> This process actually deviates from procedure detailed in the 2001 Land Law and relevant sub-decrees, because the group obtained an SLC signed by the Provincial Governor for land upon which they were already settled. This act of governance was sparked by the community’s successful deployment of multiple strategies and the opposition party casting the community as internal refugees, and was also due to their ongoing support to raise the profile of their eviction at a time of district council elections.

The lack of clarity as to who is included in the SLC led to a number of censuses undertaken by provincial authorities. However, these attempts by state officials to generate a list of who could gain land within the SLC were rejected by the community. Hence, it transpired that the community themselves were charged by the deputy governor of Snoul with counting people and mapping land to clarify the number of people on the list eligible for the SLC. In 2014, during our first field visit, the community was conducting their own census which was detailed by person (age, disability, year of arrival, land size, family information) to create a reliable list for dividing the SLC land. This met one of the community’s continued challenges: gaining recognition from the authorities for their rights to settle and cultivate the land within the SLC.

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<sup>12</sup>Initially, some Khsem residents did not accept the offer, which provided less than the three to six hectares many of the families were already farming (Sek 2014). Eventually, however, the community did accept the SLC, with specification that the land would be divided equally among claimants and that for families whose land was outside the SLC boundaries, they would obtain a plot inside the SLC by lottery.

As we discuss next, one of the key points of this confusion over who is eligible to gain a plot of land within the SLC comes from the original issuing of the SLC, in which the government did not make explicit the number of families intended for the SLC or who was eligible. These nuances also make the work we detail about rebuilding the community even more significant.

### **The creation and governing of the SLC: ‘men’s work’?**

As noted above, upon being awarded an SLC, the community returned from their protest in Phnom Penh to sign the documentation. In order to negotiate the details with the government, the community worked through an eight-member committee. This committee also supported the administrative work necessary to implement the SLC, such as mapping land and the community census mentioned above. While it would be more typical for the local government to undertake this administrative work, in the case of this ad-hoc SLC the community is taking a leading role, as we show below. The committee was elected by the community to represent them at meetings with district and provincial authorities. It was entirely comprised of men.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of the research, in 2014–2015, we could see the ‘work’ the committee was undertaking was functioning as a predominantly male task, as compared to the protest activities being described as ‘women’s work’, as we detailed earlier. While there was one female name listed on one of the documents we reviewed from 2014, during the research team’s visit and subsequent follow-up interviews, it was reiterated that ‘only men have taken the lead in the committee process’ (Interviewee 36, June 2015).

As a community made up of a large number of migrants, it is exceptional in the area in terms of the number of university-educated men available to support organizing with skills in business administration, computer literacy, and knowledge of policies and laws, all buttressed by advanced literacy skills. Among the eight community leaders, at least four had university degrees, some with more than one degree, and others with a history of religious study. As such, the community representatives possessed critical human and cultural capital that they drew upon to negotiate their claims and to reach out to important institutional actors. These male leaders are positioned very differently from potential female counterparts in the village, who have not had tertiary education and likely only partial secondary schooling, if that.

After our 2014 visit, we spoke again with Srey Mom, the female land activist who had commented on women’s roles in protest. Based on her close working relationship with the community, she provided a not entirely un-familiar perspective on gender make-up of the committee. She emphasized that women were strong enough to be in such roles, and that ‘Women are not afraid, they are brave and strong’ as seen in the protests. However, she also noted that women do face challenges in such roles. The woman who was listed in documents we reviewed was part of an earlier iteration of the committee, but was subsequently voted out. While the case appears to be quite complicated and ‘full of gossip’, Srey Mom told us it ‘is not good for women who have limited knowledge and can’t follow the other representatives’ (Interview 29, August 2014). While this certainly resonates with noted barriers for women’s participation in more formal political spheres, as well as research

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<sup>13</sup>We heard different versions of the make-up of the eight-member committee, including that the committee comprised between zero and two women. There was one woman listed on a series of meeting minutes with the District Governor that we reviewed from 2014. In follow-up with two of the male members of the committee, they did not remember a female representative.

showing that informal political spheres would not necessarily translate to the formal (Morgan 2017), it is noteworthy that the committee's work in the 'formal' political sphere is being done by men. Moreover, while the make-up of the committee is notable, the committee's work is also worth expanding upon, to provide insight into rebuilding relations with the state, and as part of revealing the new practices as gendered 'male'. The committee's work included meetings with government authorities, counting of residents as part of a census, and compiling the 'list' to indicate who was eligible for a plot in the SLC.

One of the first tasks was for the village committee to represent the community to those outside the community. In contrast to the protest period, when women were being recognized as leaders or as points of contact for media or researchers, in the SLC men took leadership roles, on the committee, in their coordination with government officials and with our research team. They were responsible for all correspondence and meetings with local government. For example, they met with the district office in June 2014 after the awarding of the SLC, for an important discussion with the government authorities about who was to be included on the list to gain a plot in the SLC (citing a letter from Deputy Governor and Chairman Paen Vanna on 24 June 2014). In this meeting, the committee accepted the task of carrying out the village census, in order to create a list of names and conduct a lottery, thus establishing who would gain a plot in the SLC. While the lottery is a typical SLC procedure, in this case the Deputy District Governor charged this committee with the task of 'making the list of names carefully and transparently' (citing letter from Deputy Governor and Chairman Paen Vanna on 24 June 2014).<sup>14</sup>

Because the document that formed the SLC only identified the recipients as the 'families who stayed at Samakki Raigsey pagoda', subsequent attempts by local officials to identify such eligible families saw an influx of nearly 500 other families, mostly from neighboring communities similarly affected by encroachment, who sought to advance claims to the SLC. Added to this tension, there are families living within the community who are not on the list of those eligible 300–400 families, and who fear they will not receive plots in the SLC. This meant that the work to decide who was 'in or out' was not only complicated, but essential to the founding of the SLC. In that 2014 meeting, it was determined that

The authorities do not know the brother and sister citizens who live in the area at this point.

That is why I [Deputy Governor] trust you [eight representatives] to make this for me. I would like the representatives of the citizens to choose clearly before sending this list of the names to the district governor's office. (citing letter from Deputy Governor and Chairman Paen Vanna on 24 June 2014)

This assignment is significant in at least two ways: first, distinct from the community's earlier attempts to be recognized by the state, this exchange shows the local government's recognition of the community via its representatives. Second, it essentially means that in the rebuilding of the community's relationship to the district government, an all-male committee was responsible for making the community 'known' and 'trusted' in relation to the district authorities, who were also all male, according to the meeting minutes.

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<sup>14</sup>Further complicating matters, some families have their names on the list *and* their land within the SLC boundaries, while others are eligible to receive land *but* their land holdings are outside the designated SLC area. We spoke with 17 households who confirmed their names were on the list of families to get land, and 11 households who both were on the list and had land that fell within the borders of the SLC.

As the committee's work progressed, the work to undertake a local census and initiate the lottery proved contentious, for several reasons. For instance, some families who had one or more members with health problems may have been left off this list for land allocation within the SLC because they were unable to attend the public protests in Phnom Penh. This held even if they were active community members, and had land under cultivation within the designated SLC area. That literate men, several of whom had tertiary education in administration and management, took the lead in determining inclusion and exclusion of the SLC is also significant, and is an important factor in reproducing community land governance as men's work. This gendered division is further deepened when we understand that those most likely excluded from the SLC were female-headed households because, missing a family member to share labor, they were unable to participate in the protests. One example is Chanda's family (Interviewee 24, July 2014), originally from Kampong Cham province. She told us, 'I'm not in the list because no one in my family went to Phnom Penh to join the protest. I was busy and unable to go because I was sick'. However, we understand that a reason why the production of the local census has taken a significant amount of time and work is because the committee is making efforts to include such households.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside this work to count and list residents, the committee must discern how the SLC will be subdivided among the families. This has been evidenced mostly in discussions of how individual plots will be formed. As one male Khmer settler explained, 'I want five hectares of land for each family from the government. I have four children, and if the land is only 2.5 hectares it won't be enough to plant crops for my family's survival'. Even as lists are made and discussions continue with government authorities, doubts remain, as illustrated above, about the sufficiency of the land allotments for a viable livelihood. Residents further explained that they simply did not know how much or where their land will be, so they did not feel confident to build new houses to replace those demolished during evictions, and, as such, they also adjusted their agricultural activities accordingly. In response, residents and leaders stressed the importance not only of carrying out the local census to determine which families are awarded land plots in the SLC, but also of establishing a need for roads, a school, a health center, a police station and a temple as part of the process of making the SLC liveable, reflecting their hopes for the future.

Enfolded within the process of working to rebuild the community, which while no longer in a period of violent crisis was still far from a routine practice of everyday farming, is the process of rebuilding gender and the community's relationship to the state. The process of interaction within the community as it undertakes its work, as well as the community's interaction with the state and others, is simultaneously a negotiated production of gendered roles and refounding state relations. While there is much at stake for the community in this process, analysis of the case has shown that men are, post-eviction, involved in logistics and community governance which are focused on creating and being responsible authorities. Such roles are not in contravention of traditionally 'male' work in Cambodia, which would include, for instance, the work of representing the family in public matters like tax collection, land registry, and civil registration with the state (Frieson 2011). The work to establish the SLC post-eviction was in effect new work for the community to take on, and much of this work was being defined as 'male' through the gendering of its practices. In other words,

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<sup>15</sup>As of August 2015, after more than one year, the committee's census for final SLC allocation is incomplete, largely due to a lack of communication from the government authorities (Interviews 37 and 38, June 2015).

as crisis shifted to rebuilding, the work of governing became the practice of men, even though women had previously been at the 'front line' in land struggles to obtain the SLC. We consider this further in our discussion.

### **Discussion: rebuilding the state and gender**

Our discussion centers on two points. First, we discuss the differentiated gender roles in Khsem that have emerged post-eviction in the rebuilding of the SLC, and their implications. Second, we abstract these findings to discuss how these articulations of gender evidence the rebuilding of relations between gender, state and land.

First, the work differentiated as 'men's work' alongside 'women's work' in the context of Khsem reveals gender as a process through which assumed differences are 'defined, imagined, and become significant' (Nightingale 2006, 171) in relation to the impacts of the large-scale land transformation that Cambodia is undergoing. In this case, the violence of state eviction influenced the Khsem community to, for instance, position women as leaders in the public protest, particularly as they differentiated the threat of violence against men and women. Women's position on the 'front line' at the public protests in Phnom Penh came after the experiences of forced eviction. Women were better able to be 'emotional' and 'shout strongly to the authorities', with a perceived reduction in the threat of violence. This increased public role for women in protest was important work for the community, resulting in the awarding of an SLC, and as reflected in family discussions regarding household priorities of income generation, crop production, childcare and the struggle to maintain current landholdings.

Women's public profile and the protest essentially shifted once the community was awarded an SLC. Like other cases (Agarwal 2000; Hart 1991; Morgan 2017), in Khsem, the increased role for women in protest did not translate into the subsequent governance work related to the establishing of the SLC, where 'limited knowledge' and other constraints were noted as barriers to participation. We showed this by examining the case beyond the moment of protest to consider the transition into establishing the SLC, and by identifying how it was not only the impacts and practices of eviction and protest that were gendered. Hence, we showed that post-eviction and rebuilding activities, such as the 'mapping' of land, and people in the form of a census and a list of SLC-eligible residents, by an all-male committee, were also formative and constitutive of the gendered roles and relationships around land post-eviction. Here, the members of an all-male committee were, and are, collecting data in a village census and keeping and making lists and land-related documents for their community in communication with local government, who are also all men.

While the actual make-up of the committee and local government is important to identify, equally important is the way that such a committee will continue to facilitate particular relationships and gender hierarchies around land and authority. As noted earlier, in Cambodia formal governing is overwhelmingly the work of men; when women who were 'leaders' in protest discussed this, they viewed their limited capacities, such as skills in written language, as an outcome of the power imbalance with men, rather than its cause (Maffi and Hong 2009). Gender differentiation in public protest might be considered a strategy in deploying gender as a 'cultural resource', effectively engaging 'emotional resistance' which actors use to further their goals (Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000). At the same time, however, this strategy effectively reinforces a hierarchy already established in Cambodia where women are often overlooked in representative government and in governing. Looking to other cases of gender and protest in land grabbing, positioning women at

the front line can be at the risk of reinforcing unequal gender relations, and we are concerned about how increased roles in one sphere (the informal) do not appear to translate to the other (the formal). Expanding on this risk and the limitations of protest by women, Morgan (2017, 11) explains that ‘Gendered political opportunities condition whether and through what political channel women act’. The barriers to more formal politics were identified in women’s low education and literacy levels, and the observation that ‘protests tend to be less time-consuming and so women do not have to sacrifice or compromise their household responsibilities on a regular basis in order to participate’ (Morgan 2017, 12).

Positioning the work of women in protest and men in governance side by side allowed us to examine more fully the impact of eviction and land grabbing on the community over different periods. We argue that this processual gender division which saw first women and then men take lead roles could or would go unnoticed if we focused only on the impacts on women. In other words, a focus only on the impacts of eviction on women might take for granted, and thus not interrogate, questions of gender in post-eviction and recovery governance if it is assumed the work of governing would be done by men.

In the case of Khsem community, we also identify the potential and real implications for the division of men’s and women’s work. With women only seen in leadership roles during protest, a dichotomy is reinforced which places women in public not for the power of their minds to tackle issues of eviction and social justice, but for the power of their bodies to deflect harm. It reinforces the gendering of authorities as male, and does not seem to challenge a hierarchical relationship, which sees men as above women, or to pose long-lasting opportunities for women’s empowerment or equality.

This brings us to the second discussion point. By positioning women’s and men’s work side by side, we illustrate that these two sets of responsibilities are part of a longer rebuilding process among residents, their land, the state and gender. Even though the authorities may have generally neglected this settlement prior to evicting it, we see that the state played an important, if messy, role in the eviction and rebuilding of Khsem. This neglect and messiness also provides insight into the work of the state and its rebuilding. Not only were residents’ homes destroyed by state authorities in eviction, necessitating the physical rebuilding of structures, but the community’s rights to exist and claim land were disavowed by the state, also necessitating a different kind of ‘rebuilding’ work. This eviction by the state becomes even more worthy of interrogation when we consider that another arm of the state – the Provincial Governor – subsequently awarded the community rights to the land from which they had been evicted in the form of an SLC. As an integral part of state rebuilding processes, the state and the community negotiated new relationships and practices. Central to this reconfiguration was the community’s negotiation to take on the work of governing and administrating the relation between territory and population as the district government transferred the responsibility to determine the list of eligible land recipients to the male committee. This rebuilding process is essential to the state project. The state is not a homogeneous entity, but is a fractured, ‘always incomplete’ project (Das and Poole 2004, 8), with different moving pieces and contingent ways that it relates to residents in rural Cambodia. In thinking about the state in this way, as continually incomplete and requiring recognition by residents and of its authority over land, we also reveal that the work of frontier settlers in Khsem is important in ‘rebuilding’ not only their relations with the state, but the state itself.

In emphasizing these processes, we find useful connections to the ways that gender is continually constructed, messy, and incomplete (Nightingale 2006; Elmhirst 2011). The relations that are being ‘rebuilt’ in the work to establish the SLC, we argue, are both

influenced by gender and shape the way that gender is performed. The assumption of violence of the state against men in eviction can influence women to take a greater public role (and risk) to gain back rights to the land. At the same time, this greater and more 'emotional' protest role for women does not position women well for continuing the important work of improving the legibility and governance of the community with local government, which was later required once the community was formally recognized. As the state erodes relations with the community – and between the community and the land – in gendered ways, these relations (or, in the gaps or lack of relations) then rebuild gender. In other words, the rebuilding of the community and state in the responses to eviction and establishing the SLC are linked to 'refounding order' over land, and the production of uneven gender relations.

### **Conclusion**

Examining the eviction and 'rebuilding' of one community in rural Cambodia, we have argued that uneven relationships among and between residents, the state, land and gender emerge. 'Rebuilding' emphasizes the continual enactments of gender, land and the state, which must all be continually worked on, in addition to the physical rebuilding; it also reveals both gender and the state as messy and contingent projects.

Moving forward, there are still many issues related to gender and land grabbing in Cambodia to address, including key knowledge gaps. We identify the need for work that considers impacts and benefits of land transformations, including ELCs and SLCs in Cambodia, that considers how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, indigeneity and class. For instance, in this case, there are several issues related to increasing competition for land within the community, unevenness in current land distribution among community members, and how this breaks down by ethnicity that need to be explored further. Class and access to education are intimately linked in Cambodia, as are gender and educational opportunities, and although we have signposted these issues, a deeper examination across cases is warranted, in terms of how these factors may shape the types of outcomes available, among other aspects.

We also suggest that insights emerging from work interrogating masculinity in Asia could be useful for understanding gender, land and the state. Additionally, gendering perpetrators of violence as well as victims and activists, and drawing out how this may be productive of types of encounters, would be an important complement to focusing on men within communities, and avoid sometimes taken-for-granted assumptions in activist and academic literature on the gendering of state violence in land grabs in the region.

We recognize that such work continues to be increasingly difficult in Cambodia with increasing restrictions on research on land and with the passage of the Law on Associations and NGOs in July 2015, which may also be used to target community organizations, such as the village committee described in this paper. These struggles for land access and land titles are very real and significant, and will continue to influence the country's social-political fabric. However, it is imperative because, as we have shown, if scholarship and documentation of the impacts of eviction on women leave out men, they also overlook the relationships between men and women that produce gender and rebuild the state.

### **Acknowledgements**

Research for this paper was done with input and assistance from Vannavy Choeun, Dang Bao Nguyet and Kaneka Keo. Special thanks to Bec Leonard and Nga Dao for their earlier discussions on land and

gender in Southeast Asia. We also thank the editors of this collection for their helpful feedback and guidance, as well as fellow ‘Gender and Generation’ panelists at the Chiang Mai 2015 LDPI conference. The paper was much improved from the feedback of participants of the November 2015 ‘Understanding Contemporary Land Acquisitions in Southeast Asia’ workshop in Toronto, not limited to Alice Beban, Peter Vandergeest, Hilary Faxon, Derek Hall and Tim Gorman. Most importantly, thank you to the community in Kratie province for taking the time to help us understand the impact of evictions, and their responses to these transformations.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Funding

In 2014, the research team conducted a research consultancy on ‘Access to productive agricultural land by the landless, land poor and smallholder farmers in four LMB countries’ as part of the Oxfam regional project called Sustaining and Enhancing the Momentum of Innovation and Learning on SRI in LMB countries (SEMIL-SRI-LMB) funded by the EU. Subsequent research was conducted independently.

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