

**Economies of Dispossession: Women in Honduras and Guatemala
in the Global Scramble for Land**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two cases from the Polochic Valley, Guatemala and the Bajo Aguan Valley, Honduras where hundreds of families have been forcefully evicted from, or coerced into leaving, their lands to allow for the expansion of industrial scale sugar cane and African palm plantations for the production of food products, cosmetics and bio-fuels.

Through interviews and focus groups carried out with indigenous and *campesino* women this paper explores how the processes of land accumulation and dispossession have negatively impacted the lives of women in the context of the land conflicts in the Bajo Aguan Valley and the Polochic Valley. It demonstrates how women in both regions have been affected by the loss of their lands and their livelihoods and how they have been exposed to forms of physical, sexual and structural violence that are particular to their experience as poor, rural, *campesino* and indigenous women. It documents many of the human rights violations they have experienced including the destruction of their homes and belongings, growing levels of poverty and malnutrition, lack of access to clean water, education and health care, the lack of alternative land or employment opportunities and the daily discrimination they face for daring to defend their human rights. The direct and structural violence experienced by the indigenous and *campesino* women in the Bajo Aguan Valley and the Polochic Valley is explored as part of a historical continuum of where women's bodies have been the objects of violence as a means of controlling populations and repressing indigenous and *campesino* movements to defend their rights and their territories.

The paper aims to situate the specific experiences of these women within the global context of the struggle by indigenous and *campesino* movements against the neoliberal model of development based on the accumulation of land and natural resources for economic exploitation. It explores how land grabbing and the expulsion of indigenous and *campesino* communities from their territories has become a hallmark of the expansion of African palm and sugar cane plantations in Guatemala and Honduras. Land grabbing in the region is impacting indigenous peoples' and *campesino*'s land rights and livelihoods, causing widespread environmental degradation, impacting food security and contributing to climate change. Communities that have resisted the process of land accumulation by refusing to sell or leave their land have faced threats, violence, sustained defamation campaigns and criminalization.

Finally, this paper examines the strategies the women from these communities have employed in resisting these processes and defending their rights and how they have participated in the wider indigenous and *campesino* movements to defend their land rights.

The principal findings of this paper include:

Stigmatization of the Communities: In both contexts members of the *campesino* movements and evicted communities are heavily stigmatized by neighboring communities and are labelled as trouble-makers and invaders. In the Bajo Aguan in particular there is much division within communities and families. In the Polochic Valley those divisions were less apparent; in the few cases where community members had decided to work on the plantation and inform on their neighbors, they were no longer accepted within the community.

Criminalization: In both contexts community members have outstanding arrest warrants, though there are far more in the Bajo Aguan, which severely limits their movements and the possibility of finding work, thus reinforcing the conditions of hardship which their families are living under. They have faced threats and harassment from state and private security forces and defamations from local and national press and from neighboring communities all with the aim of delegitimizing their struggle.

Violence: A climate of violence pervades the communities in both contexts, from the continuous harassment they experience to murders and disappearances. The families live with the constant fear of attack and/or eviction and the women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault and/or retaliatory violence as a result of their or their partners' participation in the community resistance movements.

Land and Food Crisis: The accumulation of land in both contexts has led to mass evictions of farming families and communities from their lands and their homes. In losing the land they have lost their source of livelihoods. Many have become homeless, have been forced to migrate to seek work or are renting or borrowing small plots of lands. For many this has meant a transformation from farmers to day laborers on the plantations. Nevertheless work is seasonal, wages are meagre and the stigmatization the communities have faced means that they are often denied work in the plantations. Those who were once producers of their own food have now become consumers who can rarely afford the market prices for staple goods. The monopolization of the land to grow African palm and sugar cane on an industrial scale has led to a shortage of basic grains in both regions. Food prices have soared and chronic malnutrition among children is as high as 60% in some cases.

The aim of this paper is not to paint the women of the Bajo Aguan and Polochic Valley solely as victims of repressive governments' intent on facilitating economic investment no matter what the social or environmental costs. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate their agency in resisting the dispossession from their lands and in defending their human rights. Despite the great personal cost it often entails, women in the Bajo Aguan and Polochic Valley have been actively participating in their community struggles to reclaim their lost lands and the right to live a life of dignity in their own territories. These women have been at the forefront of creating proposals for a new model of development that would respect their rights as women, *campesinos* and indigenous peoples. Through their words and their

actions they are questioning the predominant model of neoliberal development based on the exploitation and extraction of finite natural resources and promoting a discourse of social justice, respect for human rights, protecting of the environment and sustainable community development. It is essential that their voices are heard and their perspectives are included in the global debate on the sustainable uses of land and natural resources.

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