ECONOMIES OF DISPOSSESSION: Women from Honduras and Guatemala in the Global Scramble for Land

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of the land conflicts in the Polochic Valley, Guatemala and the Bajo Aguán Valley, Honduras on indigenous and campesino women. In both instances 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, provoking a land and food crisis in both regions and a major loss of livelihoods in the affected communities. In August and September 2014 semi-structured individual and focus groups interviews were carried out with women from six communities in the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley who have been directly affected by the conflicts over land. Through their words and experiences this paper will demonstrate how women from these communities 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 also focuses on their strategies of resistance to the process of land accumulation and their participation in the local land rights movements, despite the growing stigmatization and criminalization faced by them as women human rights defenders.

Topics: Land rights from a gender perspective

Keywords: Indigenous, campesino, land rights, Guatemala, Honduras

Cover photos
Access road through African palm plantations, Panamá, Bajo Aguan, Honduras/Aisling Walsh
Bridge leading to the community of ‘8 de Agosto’ Polochic Valley, Guatemala/Simone Dalmasso
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Introduction

As the demands of feeding a global population of over 7 billion become more acute and the demand for fuel in an expanding global industrial economy continues to rise, land and natural resources become ever scarcer and consequently ever more valuable. The pressure to produce more food and expand and diversify fuel sources has provoked a global scramble for land and other natural resources on a scale that can only be compared with the height of European colonial expansion.

Governments and global corporations have found a solution through the accumulation of "vast quantities of previously overlooked, supposedly marginal, underutilized or empty land" located principally in the developing world (Borras & Franco, 2013, p.1723). Many of the world’s remaining resources are located in or on indigenous and campesino territories, often considered 'marginal lands', and the rights of those communities are often set aside in the interests of national development and economic growth (Anaya, 2011; Gilbert & Doyle, 2011). The dynamic of this form of land reorganization can be characterised by the massive dispossession of campesino and indigenous families from their territories and the replacement of small-scale farms with industrial-scale plantations often owned by national or transnational corporations. This model of wealth generation is described by David Harvey (2005) as ‘accumulation through dispossession’. States play a crucial role in facilitating the accumulation of land through state appropriation and designation of land as 'marginal', the use of state or paramilitary forces to enforce compliance with land titling processes that favour capital accumulation or the failure to regulate large transfers of land and other natural resources to private entities (Borras & Franco, 2013).

In the biofuel industry land grabbing in the developing world could almost be said to be an essential element of future growth of the industry. The United Nations Conference of Trade and Development (UNCTAD) stated in its 2013 report:

A large potential remains to be exploited in the sustainable production of 1st generation biofuels in developing countries. Efficiency considerations continue to indicate that feedstock and biofuel production can be done most favourably in developing countries, where the climate to grow them and low-cost farm labour continue to exist. (UNCTAD, 2013, p.iii)

This clash of interests over the use and purpose of national territory exposes two competing visions of land. Indigenous peoples' vision of land is one of an integral territory where they produce and reproduce their culture, language, traditions, religion and social organization as well as ensure their sustenance and the survival of future generations. This is wholly incompatible with the State’s vision of land as an exploitable resource to be bought and sold (Gilbert & Doyle, 2011; FIMI, 2006).
to the General Assembly of the UN the former Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, James Anaya stated that the operations of extractive industries, including mining, forestry, oil and biofuels, represents one of the most pressing issue for indigenous peoples globally (Anaya, 2011). Indigenous peoples have termed the scramble for land and natural resources as ‘development aggression’: a source of multiple violations of individual and collective rights (Gilbert & Doyle, 2011).

This paper details two cases from the Bajo Aguán Valley, Honduras and the Polochic Valley, Guatemala where hundreds of families have been forcefully evicted from or coerced into leaving their land to allow for the expansion of industrial-scale plantations of sugar cane and African palm trees for the production of food products, cosmetics and biofuels. It focuses on how the processes of land accumulation and dispossession in Guatemala and Honduras have negatively impacted the lives of women and the realisation of their fundamental human rights. It examines the strategies women in Honduras and Guatemala have employed in resisting these processes and defending their rights and their participation in the wider indigenous and campesino movements to defend their land rights. Finally, it argues that the legacy of colonial domination, state repression, poverty, inequality, racial and gender discrimination in Central America means that indigenous and campesino women of the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley have been particularly vulnerable to direct and structural violence and human rights abuses. It describes the historical continuum where indigenous and campesino women's bodies have been the objects of state violence as a means of controlling populations and repressing indigenous and campesino movements to defend their rights and their territories.

This will be demonstrated, as far as possible, through the words of the women themselves. Central to this study are interviews with women from the affected communities in Guatemala and Honduras carried out by the author during August and September 2014. Through a mixture of semi-structured focus group sessions and individual conversations, the author interviewed women from six communities in the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley. The focus groups were restricted to women only to facilitate more open dialogue around the sensitive issues of violence and to allow for the voices of the women to be heard. In the case of Guatemala the Maya Q’eqchi interpreter was also a woman. The names of the women interviewed have been changed in order to protect their identity.
The Aguán Valley is a very fertile region in northern Honduras and as such has always attracted large-scale agricultural investment as well as flows of migration to the region from other parts of the country by landless peasants. Increasing agrarian conflict in Honduras during the 1960s led to the State initiating a process of Agrarian Reform in the 1970s and 1980s. Honduras has historically been marked by massive inequalities in and access to land and natural resources: 40% of the total cultivable land is concentrated in the hands of 1.6% of all landowners, whereas 44% of the rural population has little or no access to land and 75% of the rural population lives below the poverty line (APRODEV et al., 2011). The Agrarian Reform sought to remedy this situation by encouraging the migration of landless peasants from southern regions to the Aguán as part of an initiative that aimed to develop the incipient African Palm industry through cooperatives and collective land holdings producing oil for human consumption, soap and engine oil.

These reforms were overturned however with the passing of the 1992 Law for the Modernisation and Development of the Agricultural sector that provided for the sale of land that had been distributed during the agrarian reform process. Between 1992 and 1994, 35 cooperatively owned plantations were sold--often at prices well below market value--to private landowners, principally Miguel Facuseé of the Dinant Corporation and Rene Morales and Reynaldo Canales of the Agropalma/Oleopalma Corporation. Dinant, a palm oil producing and processing company, is now the largest landowner in the Aguán. The cooperatives claim that these sales were achieved through fraud and coercion and have repeatedly contested the legality of the current land titles (Bird, 2013).

The increase in impoverishment and food insecurity that arose from the sale of the land was exacerbated by the destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Campesino groups in the Aguán began campaigning to recover the land that they previously owned. They have undertaken legal cases for the annulment of land transfers, occupied lands, petitioned the government for the purchase of alternative lands and advocated for land redistribution in order to address inequities in current land ownership. The State response has been characterized by increasing militarization in the region, repression and criminalisation of the campesino movements and the protection of the Dinant Corporation’s lands.

The 2009 coup d'état which ousted the democratically elected president Jose Manuel “Mel” Zelaya Rosales, a tacit supporter of the campesino movements, led to greater insecurity as well as increased violence and human rights violations in the Bajo
Aguán. A 2014 report into human rights violations produced by the Permanent Observatory for Human Rights in the Aguán (OPDHA) documents the deaths and disappearances of 129 people between 2008 and 2013, including peasants, human rights defenders, private security guards and members of the Honduran police, as a direct result of the land conflict (OPDHA, 2014).

In 2009, the International Financial Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group approved a loan of US$30 million for the Dinant Corporation. The first 50% was disbursed in November 2009 despite evidence of the underlying land disputes and concerns around human rights violations associated with Dinant activities in the region. An audit carried out in late 2013 by the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) revealed that the IFC had failed to adhere its internal policies relating to the assessment of the environmental and social impact of the Dinant’s activities, and had not sufficiently taken into consideration evidence of land claims and the high risk nature of the investment (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Various attempts have been made to establish dialogue between the campesino organizations and Dinant with a view to resolving the dispute. In June 2014, the IFC contracted the US-based Consensus Building Institute (CBI) to assess the possibility of initiating a process of dialogue among all stakeholders including the company, the peasant groups and movements, local, national and international NGOs, and government. Nevertheless the situation remains extremely polarised and little progress has been made.

In the process of documenting the experiences of women from the Bajo Aguán, interviews were carried out in three communities: Panama, Guadalupe Carney and Rigores.

Panama is a community of 400 families who have lived on the land for forty years, having benefitted from the Agrarian Reform in the 1970s. In the mid 1990s, however, the community was forced to sell their lands to Dinant in a series of deals, many of which have been claimed to be illegitimate due to the use of bribery, threats or other forms of coercion to pressure the farmers to sell (Bird, 2013). The community remained in Panama and is now surrounded by Dinant palm plantations.

Rigores is a community of 144 families who make up part of the Campesino Movement of Rigores (MCR). In 2011 following repeated evictions they managed to secure the purchase of their land for 55 million Lempiras (approx. USD$500,000). They

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1 CAO (Office of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman) is an independent post that reports directly to the President of the World Bank Group. CAO reviews complaints from communities affected by development projects undertaken by IFC and MIGA.
are one of the few communities in the Aguán that has successfully secured legal ownership over the land they occupy (Bird, 2013: Interview Lourdes, 2014).

Guadalupe Carney is home to 600 families from the Campesino Movement of the Aguán (MCA), established in the late 1990s in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. In 2001 the MCA occupied state owned lands which had been used as the Center for Regional Military Training (CREM) during the 1970’s and 1980’s as a base for the US military in training Central American forces. When it closed in the late 1980’s it was bought by the National Agrarian Institute (INA) for the express purpose of land reform. Since 2001 these lands have been gradually sold by INA to the MCA. Some of the land has already been titled to the MCA while some remains in dispute (APRODEV et al., 2011).

Human Rights Violations in the Bajo Aguán

The conflict in the Aguán has given rise to multiple human rights violations that have been well documented by national and international Human Rights organizations. The repeated forced evictions faced by the communities and continued threats and aggressions from security forces have had a profound effect on the women of the communities, their health and well being, their access to essential services, their security and their role within the family and the community.

Throughout the interviews the women referred frequently to the trauma of the multiple evictions they have experienced. During the evictions in Rigores in 2011, the men fled from the community and left the women to save what they could from their houses. They had been given no warning and so they took only what they could carry. Everything they left behind was burned along with their homes. In a culture where a woman’s value rests on her reproductive role within the home, destruction of this space is a powerful attack against women and their families. Following the evictions, the families have had to rebuild their homes and recover the lost crops with a minimum of resources (Focus Group Rigores, August 10, 2014).

The loss of crops and lands, the primary source of livelihood, coupled with the difficulties that campesinos of the Bajo Aguán have in finding work in the region, has a tremendous impact on the ability to grow or to purchase sufficient food to meet their needs and those of their family. Moreover, anecdotal evidence attests to the increase in the price of staple foods as more and more land is occupied to grow African palm rather than food crops (Focus Group Rigores, August 10, 2014).

Rigores is made up of 607 hectares in total but 300 acres are savannah which isn’t even right for growing African palm. The government wants us to grow palm but we want to grow corn and beans. We know that African palm pollutes
the water and the land and it absorbs all the water as well. The government has threatened us that if we don’t grow African palm we could lose the land because we won’t have enough money to pay off the loan.” (Lourdes, Interview, August 10, 2014)

In some communities, women spoke about the fact that Dinant will not allow them to work. Community leaders and families from the campesino movements are stigmatized and criminalized, impacting their ability to find alternative employment. “Our husbands are prisoners here in the community, they can’t go out to work and we have nothing to live on” (Focus Group, Guadalupe Carney, August 11, 2014). In other communities the fear of violence from the security forces in the plantations prevents them from leaving their communities to find work: “We are really worried about our future. We feel trapped in the community. When we leave to go to work we always have to pass through the plantations, it is very dangerous” (Angela, Interview, August 09, 2014).

An International Fact Finding Mission Report from 2011 highlights the general situation of the rights to food, health and housing in the Aguán Valley as dire:

The majority of peasant communities live in shacks, in unsanitary conditions and without access to drinking water, drains, latrines, public health services and without the necessary amount of food to guarantee good health. All of these factors constitute a depressing state of health and undermine the right to health of the peasant communities in the Bajo Aguán. (APRODEV et. al., 2011, p.44).

When accessing public health services, members of the communities often face discrimination from health care professionals and in some cases they have been refused medical attention: “They won’t treat us in the hospital in Trujillo when they realize we are from Guadalupe Carney. They call us ‘Tacamiches’ (troublemakers) and insult us” (Louisa, Interview, August 11, 2014).

Pre and post-natal services, as well as care during birth are minimal and many women interviewed mentioned significant problems related to pregnancies and birth which are often attributed directly to incidents of violence and trauma they experienced while pregnant. Louisa (Interview, August 11, 2014) described an incident during which she was followed by security forces for a number of days while she was in Tocoa to attend court hearings as a human rights observer. She was three months pregnant at the time and claims that the stress and fear caused by constant surveillance provoked a miscarriage two weeks later.

Two community leaders interviewed from the Coordinator of Popular Organizations from the Aguán (COPA) – an organization that supports and accompanies the different campesino movements – mentioned a case in the community of Trinidad where a woman was detained and beaten during the evictions,
provoking a miscarriage. The women from Rigores mentioned cases of women who suffered miscarriages following the evictions in 2011, which they attribute to the violence they experienced and the use of tear gas (COPA, Interview, August 09, 2014).

Agnes, from Guadalupe Carney, was five months pregnant when she and her husband were caught up in the ‘El Tumbador’ attack of November 2010 – private security guards launched an attack on the unarmed campesinos who were peacefully occupying the land. Five people were murdered, three more were seriously injured and four women were physically and psychologically tortured during the attack. Agnes’s baby was born with cerebral trauma that has left him with a permanent disability that her doctor attributed to the physical and psychological trauma she suffered that night. Agnes lives with the guilt of having ‘damaged’ her baby while he was still in the womb. There is little medical care available to meet her son’s special needs and his medication is extremely expensive. Agnes’s husband has a pending arrest warrant which prevents him from looking for work and her son needs 24-hour care which also prevents her from seeking work (Interview Agnes, Guadalupe Carney, August 11, 2014; Bird, 2013; Louisa, Interview, August 11, 2014; OPDHA, 2015).

There are no statistics available for the levels of sexual violence occurring in the Aguán yet women living there, whether they are activists or not, have felt the constant threat of physical and sexual violence from the armed security forces:

When we go to work or leave the community we always have to pass through the plantations, the guards are always here and it is very dangerous. The women try not to walk alone so that they are not attacked by the guards and we can’t leave our houses after 5pm, it is not safe… When there are guards around we can’t walk alone or else they will take us into the palm plantations. (Angela, Interview, August 09, 2014)

Angela (Ibid) was the only woman to speak openly of incidents of sexual violence experienced by women in the communities. She never used the term rape; rather she used the euphemism of being ‘taken into the palm trees’ by the security forces to describe the attacks. That this is an act of violence was also never publicly recognized. Rather, Angela explained to us that “the guards seem to fall in love with us, that’s why they take us to the palm trees.”

COPA have been trying to raise awareness around the issue of sexual violence in the Bajo Aguán and to encourage women to report these crimes:

During the evictions in Rigores in 2011 a number of women were raped. We have been able to report a few incidences to the police. Many women are afraid to speak up and report sexual violence but we have managed to encourage some to speak up; they need lots of support to do this. (COPA, Interview, August 09, 2014)
This silence around the issue of sexual violence is indicative of social shame and stigma that is attached to rape and the tendency in Honduras to blame the victims of rape rather than the aggressors, even in situations of conflict. Thus, the onus is on women from the communities to avoid being raped by not walking around at night or going off alone. The lack of reporting of these crimes also reflects the tendency to minimize the impact of sexual violence on women and the failure to regard it as a serious crime.

Participation of Women in the Campesino Movements

Women have always played a key, although often unrecognised, role in the campesino movement in the Aguán. As the repression of men intensified between 2008 and 2013, women’s participation in the struggle became increasingly visible as they assumed more leadership positions within their communities. In many cases they have continued to actively participate in the struggle and have begun to take on active roles as human rights observers with the OPDHA. Sometimes this is a conscious decision they have made, but often the women feel that the circumstances in their communities and the violence their family or communities have suffered left them with no choice but to participate.

Angela is from the community of Panama, a member of the MCA and a human rights observer with the OPDHA. She has a three-year-old daughter and is separated from the father of her child, who is also an activist with the MCA. She is now volunteering in OPDHA as a human rights observer. She documents and reports on the violence and threats experienced by her community and neighbouring communities, and is present as an observer during evictions to document the use of violence by the police, army or private security guards.

I have been participating in the *lucha*2 since I was seven years old. I had no choice really, they evicted us from our land and we had to flee to the mountains. We lost everything in the eviction, our houses, our crops, they destroyed everything. I started training to be a human rights observer with the OPDHA a couple of years ago. At first I was scared to put on the jacket and show up to observe but I feel stronger now, brave. My partner is also a campesino leader; we try not to be identified with each other because they have threatened the partners of different campesino leaders before (...) Since I started volunteering with the OPDHA I have learned to value myself as a woman. I am busy every day in supporting the communities in their struggle. (Angela, Interview, August 09, 2014)

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2 *Lucha* is the Spanish term that captures the ‘struggle’ or ‘community resistance movement’, though literally it means to fight, in this context it does not imply the use of violence
Lourdes is one of the few female leaders of a campesino organization in the Aguán, she has been president of the MRC since 2013:

I am one of the founders of the MRC. At first I was the only woman president of a campesino organization but now there is another woman in Vallecito. It is complicated being a woman president, we still have to face sexism from some men, but most of them do trust me now. Women are recognized more now [within the campesino movement] and more and more of us are participating. (Lourdes, Interview, August 10, 2014)

The women in Rigores have realised the need to organize amongst themselves and to support each other in the process of rebuilding. According to Lourdes (Ibid) they have learned to value themselves and their contribution and they are “losing their fear of participating outside the home.”

Louisa and her parents are long-term members of the MCA. She is also now volunteering with the OPDHA as a human rights observer:

We [women activists] suffer constant persecution. I have a pending arrest warrant for being secretary of the organization. As a woman I feel under terrible pressure. I am dedicated to my work but I am also criminalized for it. I went to the police to report an incident and I ended up with an arrest warrant. They want to separate us and to destabilize the movement. It is a strategy they use to repress us and prevent us from working. (Louisa, interview, August 11, 2014)

The leaders of COPA have reported receiving death threats and have been signalled out as those ‘viejas revoltosas’ or ‘old troublemakers’ for their role in supporting the communities in resistance (COPA, Interview, August 09, 2014).

Women who participate in the struggle, such as Angela from Panama, often have the double burden of caring for their families and are often forced to choose between their family life and participating in the struggle. They can face pressure, stigma and guilt for seemingly abandoning their familial duties that men in the struggle rarely, if ever, experience: “I go to the communities every day so I have to leave my daughter with her grandmother. She doesn’t call me Mamá anymore because I am away so much” (Angela, Interview, August 08, 2014).

Despite these pressures, many of the women interviewed for this study were proud of the role they play in the campesino movement:

Life is not easy for the women of the MCA but we play one of the most important roles in the organization, like helping with road blocks. We keep things going at home and we bring food and clothes to the men while they are protesting. The men wouldn’t be able to organise without us. (Louisa, Interview, August 11, 2014)

Women who are not directly participating in the campesino movement have also become targets of violence, particularly women whose partners are well known campesino leaders. Threatening the partners and children of campesino leaders has become a commonly used strategy in the repression of the campesino movement.
wife of a *campesino* leader from the community of Panama explained how she lives in constant fear of the security guards:

> We live right next to the plantation and the guards are always passing the house. They shout at us, they scare the children, they insult me and threaten that they will shoot me. The children don’t want to go to school any more. They threw tear gas at us once when I was pregnant. One night when my husband wasn’t home they even got on the roof of the house and I thought they were going to break in. They keep saying they are going to evict us. They took a friend from La Confianza [another community] to try and get information from her about her husband. I have tried to convince my husband not to participate but he won’t give up. (Cecilia, Interview, August 09, 2014)

In Guadalupe Carney the women reported that the security forces came into the community at night and threaten the women and children, taking advantage of the fact that the men are often working in their fields at night and therefore not present at home (Focus Group, Guadalupe Carney, August 11, 2014). Women, whose partners have been murdered, arrested or who have pending arrest warrants which prevent them from leaving the community to work, have been left alone to care for their families following the murder or incarceration of their partners.

The El Tumbador attack in 2010 was a breaking point for the community of Guadalupe Carney: “It is traumatic losing members of your family. Women have to carry the whole weight of the family. If we lose our partners we are left with the fear for what will happen to our children” (Louisa, interview, August 11, 2014). Another woman explained how she had been left widowed: "My husband was murdered only 10 days after I gave birth to my son. I was left with five children to look after. We just want justice" (Focus Group, Guadalupe Carney, August 11, 2014).

Women in these circumstances have had to assume the double burden of caring for families and finding a source of income. In other cases they have had to find the means to pay legal bills associated with the criminal prosecution of their partners. Women who are left alone in these circumstances have faced aggressions at night from unidentified men who are aware that there is no ‘man of the house’.

According to the OPDHA (2014) just one out of the 129 people murdered between 2008 and 2013 as a result of the conflict was a woman, but these figures do not reflect the levels of physical and sexual violence experienced by women human rights defenders and members of the *campesino* movement in the region. Activists from the region have also said that previously only men were attacked but now women are being targeted with greater frequency (Angela, Interview, August 09, 2014; COPA, Interview, August 09, 2014). Many men and women have pending arrest warrants which have a direct impact on their freedom to work, their freedom of movement and their ability to access essential services such as education and health. The OPDHA
has registered 330 cases of detention or pending arrest warrants across the 25 communities they work in from the period between 2006 and 2014. 255 men, 39 women and 36 minors have either been arrested or have outstanding arrest warrants (OPDHA, 2015).

The incidence of murders and disappearances against the campesino communities and organizations has decreased in the Bajo Aguán significantly as a result of the renewed international scrutiny of the human rights situation there and the attempts to forge dialogue between Dinant and the campesinos. A Special Unit for Investigations of Violent Deaths in the Aguán has been established by the government to investigate deaths related to the land conflict. However, from interviews with the local activists in the Aguán there is a general belief that the repression of the campesino movement in the Aguán has changed from murder and disappearances to more indirect attacks. During the interviews carried out in September 2014 many of the women we spoke to reported experiencing continued threats and intimidation from security forces in the region (OPDHA, 2015).
Part 2: The Polochic Valley: A Background to the Current Conflict

The Polochic Valley is a low-lying valley in the east of Guatemala. The extremely fertile lands on either side of the Polochic River and Lake Izabal have been home to the indigenous Mayan Q'eqchi people for centuries. The Q'eqchi continue to represent the majority of the population in the region at 89%, of which 85% live in poverty and 45% in extreme poverty. The remaining 11% of the population is made up of mestizo (literally meaning mixed-race) and Maya-Poq'omchi. Rates of malnutrition of children under five years of age go from 65% to 85%, compared to the national average of 45% (OACNUDH, 2013).

The history of the Polochic Valley is marked by repeated dispossession of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands and the reoccupation of those same lands by the indigenous communities as their principal strategy of survival and vindication of their ancestral land rights (OACNUDH, 2013). The Q'eqchi communities suffered extreme repression during the internal armed conflict (1960-1996) and the presence of the army in the region facilitated further patterns of dispossession into the hands of large landowners, military officials and private enterprises. The massacre of 53 campesinos, active in the struggle for land rights, in Panzós in 1978 was followed by the destruction of between 90 and 100 Q'eqchi villages in the early 1980s by the Guatemalan armed forces (Bastos & Leon, 2014). Some of the women interviewed for this study are survivors of the massacre of Panzós and still bear both the emotional and physical scars.

The most recent process of dispossession, as described by Hurtado (2014), began in earnest in the Polochic Valley in 2005 with the gradual purchase of 37 farms by the Guatemalan company Ingenio Guadalupe S.A. for the purpose of establishing the sugar cane plantation 'Chabil Utzaj'. Many families that had been living and working on these lands until 2005 had already begun the process of negotiation with the former land owners and the state Land Fund for the purchase of the land and to have their ancestral land rights recognized but they could not compete with the purchase offer of the Ingenio Guadalupe S.A.

The Chabil Utzaj plantation began operating fully with the 2009 harvest but work on the plantation was soon suspended for apparent financial difficulties (OACNUDH, 2013). Seeing that the plantation remained inactive and unproductive throughout 2010, hundreds of Q'eqchi families decided to peacefully reoccupy 13 private plantations and one state owned plantation as a strategy to pressure the government into resolving the problem of access to land in the region (OACNUDH, 2013; Bastos & Leon, 2014).
The 14 communities occupying the land entered a process of dialogue with various government bodies including the state Land Fund and the Human Rights Ombudsman's office as well as representatives of business and campesino organisations. While negotiations were in progress, however, the Attorney General's office requested eviction orders for the 14 communities and 769 families were evicted between the 15th and the 19th of March 2011. In most cases they were given less than an hour's notice to leave their houses. State and private security forces were deployed in huge numbers to carry out the evictions and were accompanied by officials from the Attorney General's Office.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OACNUDH) in Guatemala has since found a number of deficiencies and irregularities in the process of obtaining the eviction orders. They also consider the manner in which the evictions were carried out to have given rise to a number of human rights violations including the disproportionate use of force and the failure to give prior notice to the families who were never given the opportunity to contest the legality of the eviction orders (OACNUDH, 2013).

In June 2011 the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights accepted a petition from a number of local and international organisations on behalf of the 14 evicted communities and ordered the state to adopt precautionary measures to protect the rights of the 769 families. The measures obliged the government to provide humanitarian assistance including food and housing in the interim and to find a long term solution for access to land for the families (OACNUDH, 2013). Nevertheless, the government has largely failed to implement the precautionary measures and the evicted families have experienced a continued deterioration in their living conditions since 2011. A census carried out by Trócaire partners in April 2013 found that: 94% of families experienced frequent food shortages and less than half of households consumed three basic meals a day and 54% of children under the age of five were suffering from chronic malnutrition (CER IXIM, 2013). A 2015 census undertaken by Oxfam evidences even further decline: 60.9% of children under five years of age were suffering from chronic malnutrition, 11.1% higher than the national average and only 48% reported receiving maize from the Ministry of Agriculture, despite the stipulations of the precautionary measures (Oxfam, 2015).

All three communities interviewed for the purposes of the study were evicted between the 15th and 19th of March and remain either renting, occupying land or staying with relatives. Over 100 women were interviewed in focus groups for the study from the communities of Río Frío, Agua Caliente and Miralvalle.
The community of Agua Caliente is surrounded on all sides by the Chabil Utzaj plantation. Following the 2011 evictions the families were able to remain in their homes but they lost all of their land leaving them without the means to grow food. They must constantly pass the plantation and its security guards as they go about their daily activities. The families from Miralvalle are now living in the village of Canlún. During the 2011 eviction they completely abandoned their former community and have been renting houses in Canlún since then. The community of Río Frío spent two weeks following the evictions taking refuge in the mountains. Trócaire and the Fundación Guillermo Toriello (FGT) managed to negotiate a deal with the 8 de Agosto community to give them some unused land and they gathered enough funds for the construction of 125 emergency houses. By the time the interviews took place there were no families left at 8 de Agosto; some families have been allocated new lands and others have decided to reoccupy the land they had left in Río Frío.

**Human Rights Violations in the Polochic Valley**

The families from the 14 communities have suffered numerous violations of their economic, social and cultural rights since 2011, particularly the right to food, to an adequate standard of living including food, water, housing and health care and the right to education. The evictions of 2011 have left deep scars in the consciousness of the evicted communities in Polochic. “Me duele mucho todo lo que pasó” - Everything that has happened hurts me terribly – was a phrase that was expressed repeatedly by the women interviewed.

We have been left without anywhere to plant our crops. We are worried about our food. We are tired and sad for everything that happened in that moment. They beat us, they used tear gas on us. It hurts to remember it (...) They burned everything we couldn’t take out of the houses. We were left without clothes, without anything. They cut down the corn. We lost so much (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014)

One of the most traumatic aspects of the eviction was the use of tear gas to force the communities to leave their homes. Many women referred to illnesses and even deaths that they, their children or partners have suffered as a result of inhaling the tear gas. The census Trócaire carried out in 2013 found that many respiratory problems and problems with sight seem to have been a result of the tear gas used during the evictions: “My husband died because of the smoke. He became sick from the gases and died. They are killing us” (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014). “The women went running into the mountains. Some have died from breathing in the tear gas. They told us they wanted to kill us” (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014).
In the immediate aftermath of the evictions many community members, women especially, fled to the mountains to seek refuge and stayed there for up to two weeks. Other communities made rough camps along the roadsides. In the majority of cases they have not been able to re-establish a permanent home and continue to live in situations of extreme precarity in terms of health and nutrition.

We spent 10 days camping out at the cross. We didn’t have anything to eat or drink. It was hard to find somewhere else to live, nobody wanted us (...). During the evictions they burned everything, we were left with nothing. We had to find land to rent. Now we are renting land at 300 quetzales (approximately US$40) a month and we don’t know what is going to happen in the future.3 (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014)

The mental health of the communities has also been profoundly affected as a result of the evictions. The 2013 census found that 13% of the total population surveyed suffered from some form of mental health issue including depression, headaches, anxiety, fainting spells and nightmares among others (CER IXIM, 2013).

The vast majority of families continue to live in precarious conditions and face the constant stress of trying to manage how they will feed themselves, how they will earn money and where they will live.

Women from the three communities interviewed are still in mourning for the life they have lost. They cannot accept their current reality and expressed a profound nostalgia for their former way of life. Before the evictions the families grew enough food both to feed themselves and to sell at the market; they lived well. Now they find themselves in a situation where they struggle to afford even the most basic necessities. Their life previous to the evictions now seems like a dream: “Before this land was free and we could plant whatever we wanted, corn, beans, chilli etc. Now we stay at home all day and we have to buy everything we need” (Focus Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014). “We used to live well, we had enough to eat and to sell, we were happy. Now we have nothing, we are left with nothing” (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014). “Before the evictions we had all our own land, even enough food to sell. Now that seems like a dream” (Focus Group Río Frío, August 28, 2014).

Access to health and education services in the region is limited to begin with, but the evicted communities – singled out as invaders and troublemakers – have faced discrimination and stigmatizations from neighbouring communities and public servants, restricting their access even further. They have been denied treatment in public health centres and children have faced bullying and harassment in local schools (CER IXIM, 2013).

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3 The estimated monthly income for the families is 404 quetzales a month, if they have to pay rent of 300 quetzales then they are left with only 105 all other expenses. When the interviews took place, the women reported that a quintal (46kg) of maize cost 150 quetzales and might last a family a couple of weeks. Thus families paying rent cannot afford to pay for both housing and their monthly food needs (Oxfam 2015).
Furthermore, the communities have little or no money to pay for these services privately and thus rely on accessing public schools and clinics: “I haven’t felt well since the evictions. They don’t give me anything in the health centre; I don’t have the energy to look after my children. I feel sad all the time” (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014).

In Agua Caliente the women complained of the poor treatment they receive at the local health centre and that sometimes there are no staff and other times no medicine. The women are left alone while giving birth and feel like the medical staff do not treat them well. In Miralvalle the Comadrona (traditional midwife) attends women in the community at birth and treats other illnesses, a preferable alternative to visiting the local hospital:

Sometimes we have to go to hospital but we are scared because they are always watching us. They don’t treat us well and they often send us to a private doctor but we have no money to pay. We can’t pay for the prescriptions either. (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014)

The families also face discrimination when seeking work in the region. The Chabil Utzaj plantation has been lauded for supporting local development promoted as a source of employment for local communities. Employment, however, is largely seasonal - for the sugar cane harvest lasting three months – poorly paid, with no benefits and in most cases the plantation refuses to employ people from the evicted communities. While many men have been forced to migrate to find work elsewhere, the women have found some alternative sources of income in selling firewood and doing domestic chores such as washing clothes for families in the town of Panzós. “We don’t have anywhere to work, nor do the men. We have been collecting firewood to sell but there isn’t any left and we are very worried” (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014).

“We are very worried about money. We don’t have anywhere to grow crops nor food for the children. Sometimes we find work. There are many illnesses in the community but we have no money to pay for the health centre. The company only takes on young people so there is no hope for us here.” (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014)

The loss of land has had wide-ranging implications for women’s productive role within the family and the community: previously their principle responsibilities included duties in the home and helping their husbands with the planting and harvesting but they now have to seek work outside the home and the immediate community. Domestic work has also become that much harder under the temporary and precarious conditions under which they live.

Left without land to grown their staple crops of corn and beans the majority of families struggle to provide even two meals a day. Some families continue to fish but
access to rivers is often controlled by the security guards from Chabil Utzaj and the rivers are reported to be polluted (CER IXIM, 2013). Most families now are forced to buy, rather than produce, their food. The accumulation of land for agro-industrial plantations has resulted in a shortage in supply of the basic staples of maize and beans in the region and consequently price inflation for both products, putting further pressure on food consumption. Many of the women interviewed mentioned the dramatic increase in the price of maize and their struggle to afford it as well as their discomfort with the shift from being self-sufficient producers to consumers.

Most of the families receive food aid from the government every three months but distribution is irregular and it has never been enough to allow the families to maintain a nutritious diet. The rations distributed are based on the standard of a family of four when most families from the communities in Polochic are much larger. The content of the rations varies, is not appropriate for the cultural context and there are reports that the food is out of date and contains worms. “The government sends us corn every three months but it is never enough” (Focus Group, Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014).

Since 2011 the evicted communities claim to have experienced sustained attacks, threats, intimidation and discrimination from the police, employees and private security guards from the Chabil Utzaj plantation, by neighbouring communities and by public officials. The acts of aggression against them include shots fired into the air at night, beatings, death threats, attempted assassinations and repeated evictions and destruction of crops in their new settlements. In May 2011 María Margarita Chub, a woman who had been active in the struggle for the recovery of their land, was shot in her home in Paraná, Panzós in front of her children. The following August shots were fired at the same community that had been camped out on the side of the road leaving four people injured. That same night four women from the community were severely beaten (Bastos, S. & Leon, Q., 2014).

Many of the families have to pass by or through lands currently in possession of Chabil Utzaj where they face the danger of an encounter with the security guards. This presence has restricted their freedom to carry out even the most basic tasks such as fetching water or firewood as they fear for their safety and the safety of their children if they venture away from their homes: "We can’t go to the village by ourselves because the security guards from the company have threatened us. They come here every afternoon, they treat us as if we were animals and they are always carrying weapons" (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014).

The guards keep watching us and threatening us. They treat us like animals. Recently they started asking us when we are going to leave? They pass by
everyday to check on us and they are always armed. They fire into the air sometimes. We can’t go out alone; we always have to go in twos or threes. When we have meetings they ask us what they are about and what we are going to do. (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014)

Women and girls in the communities face the additional threat of sexual violence from the police and security guards. As was the case in Honduras, it is rarely ever mentioned as an explicit threat but it is generally understood that women must not go out alone. In cases where the men have left to find work elsewhere and the women have been left alone to look after the home, the women are particularly vulnerable: “We are always being watched. We don’t feel good, we can’t go out alone. It is dangerous when our husbands go out fishing” (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014).

In only one instance the women interviewed for the study made reference to incidents of sexual violence. Rosario, from Miralvalle spoke openly of how she was raped by soldiers during the internal armed conflict in the 1980’s. She claimed that the acts of sexual violence that were committed then have since been repeated:

32 years ago when they first began to remove us from our lands, the soldiers raped me. I am not ashamed to say what happened to me, we have to talk about it. That is why we are afraid to go out alone. In case it happens to us again. The soldiers want to do that to us, that’s why they are always watching us. That is why I keep participating. There are other women who are ashamed to talk about what happened them, but it is better to talk about these things, otherwise how can we keep going? (Rosario, Interview, August 27, 2014)

There are no officially reported cases of sexual violence that occurred neither during the evictions nor over the course of the last four years. Nevertheless, it is a tactic that is often repeated in indigenous communities that have demonstrated opposition to extractive projects on their land, and in the Polochic Valley, in particular, there are strong precedents for this type of violence. There are currently two open cases of sexual violence against Q’eqchi women in the Polochic Valley: the case of Sepur Zarco, relating to women kept in sexual and domestic slavery during the internal armed conflict, and the case of Lote 8, relating to women who were raped during the eviction of their community to make way for a mining operation in 2007 (ECAP, 2015; Mendez & Carrera, 2014).

The silence around the issue of sexual violence is characteristic of a highly patriarchal culture where they face the probability of blame, stigmatization and loss of social status if they were to report acts of sexual violence. It is probable that even amongst themselves they are afraid to share what happened nor with their husbands or family for fear of reprisals. The fact that the women are Maya Q’eqchi implies a greater vulnerability to violence as well as a greater probability of impunity from their mestizo aggressors (Mendez, Interview, July 07, 2014). The use of sexual violence as a means
of controlling and subduing the community as well as creating divisions and isolation among women, their families and their neighbours, was a strategy often used during the internal armed conflict and scars have lasted decades (Mendez & Carrera, 2014).

Participation of Women in the Indigenous Movements for Land Rights

One of the first acts of resistance by the communities when faced with evictions was the refusal of the women to leave their houses or their belongings. Men in the communities are frequently arrested and so fled for safety while the women stayed behind and thus became the first line of defence of their homes and lands. Thus women have been active in the struggle for land rights in Polochic since the moment they were first threatened with eviction. They are often on the front lines of community resistance and thus vulnerable to violence and repression:

We didn't want to leave our homes because we knew they were going to take over our lands. We resisted as long as possible until the police and the military arrived and then there was no more time left to leave. (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014)

Although their contribution is often not recognised within their community and that they rarely hold leadership positions, they are conscious of their role in the struggle, their right to participate and the fact that the men could not continue without them (Mendez, Interview, July 07, 2014).

On the 19th of March 2012, exactly one year following the evictions, thousands of campesinos from Polochic and other communities of Alta Verapaz affected by resource exploitation on their lands marched from Cobán to Guatemala City to demand justice for indigenous communities. Many women from the communities participated in this march and felt it was a key moment in the struggle to vindicate their rights:

We women keep fighting for the land. We have to fight because women have the right to land. I have been to the capital as well to share what I have lived through. We have to keep talking about everything that has happened to us. That is why we joined the march. It is important that they know what has happened us and what life is like for women. (Focus Group Miralvalle, August 27, 2014)

At the beginning of the march we felt great because we thought this time the government would listen to us and give us land. We could do it again now to show them that we are still continuing with the lucha. (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014)

Despite the fact the government has largely failed to respect the terms of the agreement with the communities, the women are still convinced of the need to participate and to keep pressuring the government:
The government doesn't listen to us but we have to keep fighting. We just want to know where we can go and live. We went to the capital to shout our demands but the government still has not given us somewhere to live. (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014).

We cannot stop the *lucha*, we have to speak out, tell people what happened to us. When we are called we participate. We are going to keep asking until they give us land (...) Are we animals? Do we not have rights? The government says we are invaders, but they are the invaders. (Focus Group Río Frío, September 28, 2014)

In each of the communities there is a women’s council to represent the views and the needs of women. The levels of participation and functionality of the councils vary widely between communities and the ruptures in the social fabric that have occurred since the evictions have further weakened these structures. The councils are seen as both a space for women from the community to organise and share with each other and an opportunity for exchange with women from other communities.

We have been participating in the council since it was set up. We are happy to participate as we help each other and it encourages other women. When the communities get together it is an opportunity to meet other women (...) We give each other words of support and we discuss amongst ourselves how we can keep going (...) We discover other ways to carry on and we feel like we are being accompanied in our struggle. (Focus Group Agua Caliente, August 26, 2014)

Occupation of land has become another strategy that is being used with increasing frequency by the evicted communities in the face of the failure of the government to resolve the conflict. The families of Río Frío moved back to their old community in July 2014, directly across from the Chabil Utzaj plantation, and have managed to gradually occupy more land for their homes and for growing crops.

We are occupying the land again because we could find nowhere else to live. At first they gave us a small piece of land in 8 de Agosto but we suffered a lot there. We only had our house and no land, we were fed up. We’re not leaving here until the government keeps its promises. (Focus Group Río Frío, August 28, 2014)

Women’s participation in the struggle for land and the defence of their rights does not come without risk. They often meet resistance from within their own families and communities and are also vulnerable to violence from the security guards and the police:

We receive threats, we can’t go out alone, they say they are going to kill us. But not for that we are going to leave. We’ll see what we do if they come here (...) The government doesn’t take us into account because we are Q’eqchi women, but we are going to stay here. (Focus Group Río Frío, August 28, 2014)

The principal solution to the conflict in the Polochic Valley offered by the State is the procurement of alternative lands for the families. Following the *campesino* march in
2012 the Government of Otto Pérez Molina agreed to find land for 300 families each year. Out of 769 evicted families in 2011 only 220 families had been allocated alternative lands by the end of 2015 leaving 549 families waiting for access to land. There are mixed feelings among the communities about moving to alternative lands. Firstly, there are doubts among the communities as to how they will repay the loans for the land and if they will have access to basic necessities such as water, sanitation, health and education services. The transfer of the new lands was secured through the state Land Fund in a deal that allowed the families to pay off the debt for the purchase through labour and productive projects. Various state institutions agreed to provide a minimum of infrastructure on the new lands including improvements to the access road, housing, water and sanitation services and a school. However, when the families finally arrived to the new lands they found that little of this infrastructure had been provided (Interviews with communities in San Valentin & Sactelá, February 19 & August 5, 2014).

On the one hand the families welcome the chance to finally secure ownership of their own lands but on the other hand they have many doubts about this process. Ideally, they would take their old lands back that are currently occupied by the Chabil Utaj plantation. Thus far the new lands of have been located far away from their original lands and the process of allocation has resulted in the breaking up of communities as a few families from each of the evicted communities have moved to the new land. The dispersing of the communities is particularly difficult for the women; it results in the breaking up of family ties and support networks. (Focus Group Río Frío, August 28, 2014)
Part 3: Analysis

The experiences of the women of the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley are emblematic of the negative impact irresponsible land governance can have on indigenous and campesino women. In contexts where the State facilitates the massive accumulation of lands by corporations and/or large landowners through the dispossession of local indigenous and campesino communities from their lands, multiple violations of the human rights of these communities are the inevitable result.

Indigenous and campesino women are particularly vulnerable to violations of their human rights and to direct and structural forms of violence in situations where land grabbing and resource exploitation are carried out without consultation or state regulation and accompanied by violence. The words of the women from the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley attest to the threat of and the use of sexual violence as a way of controlling women's movement and as a form of both individual and collective punishment and community repression. Women who participate actively in the community resistance movements are more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence as a form of punishment for their participation and intimidation to pressure them into giving up. According to indigenous rights scholar Ruana Kuokkanen (2008, p.217), economic growth based on the extraction and exploitation of natural resources perpetuates a form of “racialized and sexualized” violence against poor and marginalised indigenous and campesino women that represents a threat to their very survival.

In the context of campesino and indigenous communities' resistance to extractive projects, the direct and structural violence that has occurred and the patterns of repression used against women, mirror and replicate patterns of violence that have existed for centuries: indigenous and campesino women's bodies are one of the principal battlegrounds in the conflict over land (Mendez & Carrera, 2014). Throughout the colonial period in Central America the control and exploitation of women's bodies, through rape and sexual slavery, formed part of a wider system of oppression and discrimination with the ultimate aim of controlling and administering the territory.

The use of sexual violence as a strategy of oppression in social conflict around land rights is based on the patriarchal belief that women are the property of their husbands and therefore an extension of male territory. By violating women, State forces demonstrate their power over the male indigenous and campesino leaders by occupying and defiling their bodies. Indigenous and campesino women's sexuality can be seen as a "metaphor for both colonial conquest and armed conflict, with their tropes of domination and (territorial) penetration" (FIMI, 2006, p.31). As the pressure on
campesino and indigenous peoples' territory increases these patterns of domination and penetration continue to impact the lives of indigenous and campesino women (Ibid).

Throughout the internal armed conflict in Guatemala the state used the systematic rape and murder of women to punish, subdue and control the indigenous population with the aim of clearing territories and accumulating vast amounts of land for state and private interests (CALDH, 2014). This pattern of sexual violence was intended to destroy reproduction within indigenous communities and therefore the birth of future generations of people whom the state considered enemies. The Guatemalan Truth Commission report found that indigenous women represented 89% of the total number of victims of sexual violence and 99% of those acts have been attributed to state forces (Mendez & Carrera, 2014).

Despite the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords in 1996, indigenous communities are experiencing many of the same strategies of violence and criminalization employed by the state and paramilitary forces during the internal armed conflict to impose extractive projects in indigenous territories and subdue those who are actively resisting the exploitation of natural resources. This new wave of dispossession, promoted and implemented by alliances between the State, the Army, the Guatemalan oligarchy and transnational corporations, has maintained the same patterns of racial and gender discrimination and poverty that have existed in Guatemala for centuries (CALDH 2014; Mendez & Carrera 2015).

Honduras did not experience a recent conflict on the scale of Guatemala or other countries in Central America, yet it has a long legacy of violence against women. In fact, it is one of the most dangerous countries to be a woman outside of a warzone. According to the Observatory on Violence of the Institute for Democracy, Peace and Security (IUDPAS) of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, between 2005 and 2013, the annual number of violent deaths of women increased from 175 to 636, representing a 263.4% increase in just nine years. The National Demographic and Health survey of Honduras for 2011-2012 (NDHS) reveals that during the 12 month period 27% of women experienced physical violence from the age of 15 and 22% of women experienced violence inflicted by their spouse or partner (INE, 2013).

The lack of reporting of cases of sexual violence in the Bajo Aguán reflects the national tendency where sexual crimes and violence against women go underreported and any cases that are reported are likely to remain unpunished. Often the violence experienced by women is considered a 'normal' part of life; they may be afraid to report having experienced violence to the authorities or even to speak openly about it. In the case of women human rights defenders and women involved in the campesino
movements, sexual violence is used as a form of individual and collective punishment as well as a mechanism for controlling the population and subduing community activism.

Thus indigenous and campesino women’s activism is borne out of the necessity for survival in a system that “depends on and exacerbates racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist relations of rule” (Mohanty, 2003, p.510), in which indigenous and campesino women and their bodies are exploitable and expendable. Indigenous and campesino women have assumed a protagonist’s role in the struggles that challenge this most recent manifestation of imperialism by defending the integrity of their lands, territories and resources and the collective rights of their communities. As the pressure exerted on their natural resources intensifies indigenous women have actively defended their community’s rights to self-determination in the control of their own economic, social and cultural development on the basis that their rights as women can only be assured if the collective rights of their community are also protected (FIMI, 2006).

The defence of their land in the face of natural resource extraction and exploitation is a priority for the Q'eqchi women of the Polochic Valley. The Valley has been their home for generations and the land represents their principal source of sustenance and livelihood; it has protected them during times of conflict and it has innate spiritual and cultural significance. In the current context where agricultural labour on coffee, sugar or palm plantations is seasonal and wages for women do not meet even the legal minimum – where other opportunities for employment are scarce or non-existent and migration becomes the only viable option, where food prices continue to increase but incomes do not – the defence of their lands is increasingly critical for the indigenous women of the Polochic Valley. They may not have considered themselves activists before the evictions in 2011; but now they have no choice but to assume this role. The women and their communities continue to demand the implementation of the precautionary measures emitted by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights; the provision of sufficient food aid to the evicted families and the restitution of land, where possible, and the otherwise reallocation of land to the remaining 549 evicted families.

The Q'eqchi women have also voiced specific demands in relation to their gendered position within the community struggle, particularly for community, municipal and national authorities to respect and fulfil their rights as women; to respect and care for Mother Earth; and for local and national authorities to facilitate the right of women to own land.
In the Bajo Aguán women’s demands focus on justice for campesinos who have been murdered, disappeared or falsely imprisoned as a result of their participation in the campesino movement, an end to impunity for those responsible for these acts and to reclaim the lands they have lost to the Dinant Corporation. They wish to re-establish the cooperative system from the 1970s and 1980s that would allow them to produce enough food for themselves and enough palm oil to earn an extra income. Regarding their position as women within the larger community struggle they have demanded an agrarian reform law with a gender equity focus, respect for existing agreements with the campesino movements and for decisions to be finally made taken over the rightful ownership in disputed lands and for the restitution of all lands that were handed over to campesinos during the agrarian reforms of the 1970s (Plataforma Agraria, 2015).
Conclusion

This paper has detailed the experiences of campesino and indigenous women from the Bajo Aguán Valley in Honduras and the Polochic Valley in Guatemala who have been caught up in a local struggle to protect their territories, their human rights and their livelihoods in the face of industrial scale African Palm and sugar cane plantations. It has documented their lived experiences of the violence they suffered during the various eviction processes and the aggressions they have continued to suffer. In both cases the communities and those who openly defend their rights, particularly women, are stigmatised and criminalised. It further documents the continued violations of their economic, social and cultural rights in their lack of access to adequate health care, the lack of food and the alarming rates of malnutrition in the communities, the denial of their land and resource rights and the denial of their right to work.

This paper has demonstrated that the development model promoted in Guatemala and Honduras, of accumulation through dispossession, gives rise to overlapping forms of violence and oppression that leave deep marks on indigenous and campesino women's minds and bodies. In these 'economies of dispossession' their bodies become both a literal and metaphorical battleground: on one hand they are vulnerable to physical and sexual violence as a form of both individual and collective punishment and on the other hand they are transformed from producers to consumers their bodies are further exploited as a cheap source of manual labour for the plantations.

The aim of this paper is not to paint the women of the Bajo Aguán and Polochic Valley solely as victims of a repressive system intent on facilitating economic investment no matter the social or environmental consequences. Rather, it has sought 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 Aguán and Polochic Valley have been actively participating in community struggles to reclaim their lost lands and the right to live a life of dignity in their own territories.

Moreover, these women have been at the forefront of creating proposals for a new model of development that would respect their rights as women, as campesino communities and as indigenous people. Through their words and their actions they are questioning the predominant model of economic development based on the exploitation and extraction of finite natural resources in favour of a discourse of social justice, respect for human rights, environmental protection and sustainable community
development. In calling for an end to the social and environmental destruction implied in the processes of accumulation and dispossession they are ultimately speaking for humanity as a whole (Mohanty, 2003; FIMI, 2006).

These are local struggles with global origins and implications. The global demand for 'sustainable' alternatives to fossil fuels, in the form of biofuels, is one of the principal drivers of land grabbing in the developing world. Fertile, sub-tropical regions such as Honduras and Guatemala are particularly suited for palm oil and sugar cane plantation and have thus become particularly attractive for investments by international and national corporations eager to enter the biofuels market. It cannot be stated definitively that sugar cane and African palm produced in Guatemala and Honduras is destined exclusively for the biofuels market; much is destined for human consumption particularly in processed foods, cosmetics and cooking oil. Nevertheless, the surge in the global biofuel industry has played a crucial role in spurring the demand for ethanol and biodiesel derived from sugar cane and African palm.

To conclude, it is clear from the cases of the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley, that considerations of sustainability cannot ignore the social and environmental costs of producing biofuels, nor the impact on the realisation of fundamental human rights by these industries. It is essential that the voices of the women from the Bajo Aguán and the Polochic Valley are heard and their perspectives are included in the global debate on the sustainable use of land and natural resources. Their voices contribute to a deepened understanding of the impacts of the exploitation of land and natural resources, where this is achieved by ‘accumulation through dispossession’, on the lives of women from the global south and their communities.
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