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## Women in Land Struggles: The Implications of Female Activism and Emotional Resistance for Gender Equity

**Anne Hennings**

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# Women in Land Struggles: The Implications of Female Activism and Emotional Resistance for Gender Equity

Anne Hennings

## Abstract

Despite deeply engrained images of female domesticity and conventional gender norms, women are increasingly joining land struggles in Cambodia. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, my findings suggest that land rights activism in Cambodia has undergone a gendered re-framing process. Reasoning that women tend to use non-violent means of contestation and are less prone to violent responses from security personnel, non-governmental organizations push women affected by land grabs and eviction to the frontline of protests. Moreover, female activists are encouraged to publicly display emotions such as sorrow and pain, in sharp contrast with the notion of feminine modesty. I critically question the women-to-the-front strategy and, drawing on Sara Ahmed's politics of emotions, show the adverse risks for female activists. Following that, I argue that the instrumentalization of female bodies and emotions in land rights protests perpetuates gender disparities instead of strengthening female agency in Cambodian society or opening up political space for women.

## Zusammenfassung

In Kambodscha sind Aktivistinnen trotz tief verwurzelter Geschlechternormen und Vorstellungen von weiblicher Häuslichkeit zunehmend an Kämpfen um Land beteiligt. Mit der Begründung, dass Frauen eher zu Gewaltfreiheit tendierten und zugleich weniger Gewalt durch Sicherheitskräfte erfahren, drängen Nichtregierungsorganisationen von Vertreibung und Landraub betroffene Frauen in die erste Reihe von Protesten. Die Ergebnisse meiner ethnografischen Feldforschung zeigen zugleich, dass Aktivistinnen dazu angehalten werden Emotionen, wie den erfahrenen Schmerz, öffentlich zum Ausdruck zu bringen. Dies steht im scharfen Kontrast zum vorherrschenden kulturellen Kodex, der Frauen zu Bescheidenheit und Zurückhaltung anhält. Ich hinterfrage die Neuausrichtung der Kämpfe um Land daher kritisch und zeige unter Bezugnahme auf Sara Ahmeds Konzept der Politik der Emotionen, mit welchen Risiken die Feminisierung von Landrechtskämpfen für kambodschanische Aktivistinnen verbunden ist. Ich argumentiere zudem, dass die Instrumentalisierung weiblicher Körper und Emotionen in Landrechtsprotesten Geschlechterdisparitäten in Kambodscha perpetuiert, statt die Stellung von Frauen und ihre politische Handlungsmacht in der Gesellschaft zu stärken.

**Keywords:** dispossession, land grabbing, gendered resistance, politics of emotion, Cambodia

**Schlagwörter:** Enteignung, Landraub, geschlechtsspezifischer Aktivismus, Politik der Emotionen, Kambodscha

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## 1 Introduction

In the wake of the recent valorization of land and natural resources, female forest defenders and land rights activists worldwide have come to the fore, taking part in protest campaigns, marches, and everyday resistance in urban and rural areas. They demand land rights for women and fight corporate land grabs and dispossession on behalf of their communities. Often referred to as land grabbing, there is a rich literature on the impact of the expansion of global capital and corporate control over territories and related processes of agrarian transformation (Peluso/Lund 2011; GRAIN 2016; White et al. 2012). While scholars increasingly turn to the gendered impacts of the post-2007 enclosures (Behrmann 2012: 73; Daley/Pallas 2014; Levien 2017), there is only a relatively small body of literature that deals with gendered or female responses to land deals (however, see Morgan 2017; Lamb et al. 2017; Brickell 2014). Likewise, interlinkages between female agency and external drivers such as women's empowerment through donor-driven civil society interventions remain unconsidered, as do the repercussions for conventional gender norms. Hall et al. (2015: 482) even speak of gender as one of the two main "silences" in the land deal and political responses from below literature.

In order to contribute to filling this gap, I investigate the case of Cambodia, where female land activists are increasingly reshaping the struggle against land dispossessions. After the end of the war in 1998, the governing elite and the military took advantage of the disorder and the country became a hotspot for land grabs and forced evictions in the course of the modernization of the agrarian sector (Le Billon 2010; Global Witness 2016; Schoenberger et al. 2017). In Cambodia, it is widely believed that women will generally resort to non-violent means and are less exposed to violence from security personnel, which is why non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promote female leadership and push Cambodian women to the front of land protests. I question this assumption and illustrate, first, the adverse risks involved for female activists. Second, I further the argument that land deals are shaped by, but also reinforce, pre-existing gender inequalities (Hall et al. 2015: 473; Daley/Pallas 2014: 195; Ryan 2018). In so doing, I draw on Sara Ahmed's politics of emotions to show that the instrumentalization of women's bodies and the capitalization of emotions in the struggle against land grabbing perpetuate prevailing gender disparities.

The findings are based on ethnographic field research conducted in Cambodia between April 2016 and October 2017. I conducted 110 non-standardized interviews and four focus group discussions in English and Khmer with community members and leaders, activists, lawyers, company representatives, civil society organizations, plantation laborers, union representatives, former *Khmer Rouge* cadres, and ministry officials, in the capitol Phnom Penh and in ten provinces. The researched land conflicts are related to Economic Land Concessions, Social Land Concessions, land grabs by the military or tycoons, infrastructure development, e.g. the contested *Lower Sesan Dam II*, and urban evictions, and cover different stages of conflict, mobilization, and eviction. Following the ethnographic peace research approach (Millar 2018; Hennings 2017), my fieldwork combined formal interviews, informal conversations with individuals and groups, as well as long-term participant and spatial observations, with a special emphasis on the role of women, ex-combatants, dynamics in indigenous and Khmer communities, and overall processes of

social differentiation. I further reviewed existing studies, media coverage, and documentation of the land conflicts, including petitions and official correspondence.

This working paper is organized as follows. I first conceptualize the linkages between feminine images and perceptions of women in contentious politics. Second, I discuss the perception of womanhood and female agency in Cambodia before, third, illustrating the twofold strategy of civil society organizations in reframing land struggles, including the strategic positioning of women in protests and the capitalization of the female embodiment of emotions. Fourth, I outline the associated risks for female activists and, finally, critically reflect on the impact of these practices on the perception of womanhood, female agency, and on gender roles in general in Cambodia.

## 2 Feminine Images and Emotions in Contentious Politics

Most social movements, either unconsciously or deliberately, incorporate feminine-attributed qualities such as peacefulness and nurturance into their identities and tactics, whether they pursue gender-specific goals or not; qualities that are mirrored in names, language, or clothing (Einwohner et al. 2000: 687). Notably, peace and land rights activists apply feminine images and are in many cases advised by NGOs to use (or manipulate) gender as a strategic weapon to the benefit of the group's legitimacy (ibid.: 686). In this way, opponents and third parties evaluate land activists, for example, with a certain gender lens, which may be conducive for their protest efforts. Following Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (1995: 1), I define gender "as a fluid, contingent process characterized by contestation, ambivalence, and change in which the intersections of the past and present, the local and the global, define the axes for exploring the negotiation and reworking of gender." NGOs in Cambodia skillfully use these features of gender, as I will show in the following analysis.

In addition to gender, emotions play a key role in land rights movements. Particularly emotions related to morality, such as shame, guilt, and pride, help to facilitate mobilization, social alliances, and in-group solidarity (Goodwin et al. 2001: 17). These can also be utilized to influence the general public by generating compassion or anger towards specific policies, events, or persons in charge, i.e. land defenders may blame big people or bureaucrats. From a gender perspective, however, the use of emotions remains ambivalent. Worldwide, women, including female activists, are associated with a lack of rational skills, will, and judgement, and are often labeled as unprofessional and emotional. In this sense, to be emotional is equated with being reactive and dependent (Ahmed 2014: 3 and 170).

This article draws on Ahmed's concept of the politics of emotions, whereby emotions are understood as (mediated) cultural practices from which bodies and the material world materialize (Ahmed 2014: 9; Williams 2001: 73). Turning to Ahmed's feminist reading of the embodiment of emotions enables me to analyze the orchestrated capitalization of female bodies and emotions such as shame, fear, and pain in urban and rural land protests and its repercussions in Cambodia. In so doing, it adds a more critical perspective on the incorporation of supposedly female attributed emotions, which has previously only been discussed in connection with framing approaches or in terms of successfulness in the social

movement literature. Following Goodwin et al. (2001: 10), I argue that the public display of emotions by female activists contributes threefold to the cause of the land defenders in the short-term, in the sense of strengthening their internal bond, attracting public attention, and facilitating solidarity with compassionate outsiders. Yet at the same time, this strategy exposes female activists to emotional and physical harm and, what is more, fails to challenge the subordinate position of women in Cambodian society.

### 3 Perception of Women and Female Activism in Contemporary Cambodia

As much as the configuration of contestation depends on the political context, the available space to express one's opinion, and the general socio-economic and historical context, female agency is rooted in women's experiences and place in society (Deonandan et al. 2017: 413). Unlike female land rights or anti-mining activists in other parts of the world, who link their present and past struggles, there has been little space for women to speak up in Cambodia (ibid.: 413). The tradition of gender inequality and a wider culture of submission of women is deeply rooted in Cambodian culture and still widespread today. According to the code for women, the *Chbap Srei*<sup>1</sup>, *Khmer* women are supposed to be subordinate and passive, and are socialized to "move quietly around the house, be polite, avoid vulgarity, and be careful to preserve the dignity and feeling of her husband" (Brickell 2011: 438). The period following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime (which lasted from 1975 to 1979), during which many radical social changes had been imposed, saw a revival of traditional ideals of womanhood (and masculinity), including the *Chbap Srei*. While the short *Khmer Rouge* period is considered the most gender equitable in Cambodia's history, most Cambodians quickly returned to traditions from the pre-colonial "golden age" in the wake of their reign. At the same time, Katherine Brickell speaks of slowly changing contours of gender relations in post-conflict Cambodia (2011: 437). Firstly, shifts in the formal employment sector have spurred demand for female labor, especially in garment factories and on plantations. Hence, many women have become key income providers for their families (on the challenges that female migrant workers face, see Derks 2008). Secondly, the educated younger (mostly urban) generation has slowly started to question gender ideals and conforms to a lesser degree, despite enormous social pressure (Brickell 2011: 448). Nonetheless, these changes take shape at a slow pace and are counteracted by women's limited access to political power, which is still perceived as a male domain (Lamb et al. 2017: 1229; McGrew et al. 2004: 10).

The perception of women as passive, modest, and apolitical is reflected in the comparatively low numbers of female activists in the country. It is striking, for instance, that only men hold union leader positions at the federal level in the garment sector that employs mostly female

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<sup>1</sup> Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, this set of normative poems, that also incorporates Buddhist principles, is the key reference on (in)appropriate female behavior and the consequences of non-compliance. It is still taught in school today as "a matter of national identity" (Brickell 2011: 440; for more information see Luco 2002).

workers. A different picture unfolds in the context of land conflicts and contested eviction. Female community members in particular, including former *Khmer Rouge* cadres, indigenous women, and city dwellers, bear the brunt of land grabs and dispossession (CCHR 2016: 1). Although the role and degree of commitment of female activists varies from case to case, the idea of women-led protest against land grabbing and eviction seems to be widely acknowledged by community members all over the country and civil society organizations alike. Being disproportionately affected, it is seen as a legitimate choice for women to stand up in order to ensure a future for their children (see also Peyton 2017 on Senegal). A long-standing urban activist pointed out: “You know, women work at home. But if there is no home anymore, she has to go out and speak up. Recently, the voice of women for compensation and advocacy is stronger. They suffer! Some women have children. Now we have more knowledge to use our rights” (Interview, Boeung Kak and Borei Keila activists, Phnom Penh, 11 January 2017). As such, women increasingly claim their rights and more and more affected communities have elected female representatives (see also Lamb et al. 2017: 1219).

In line with other authors, my interlocutors highlighted that they see the fight for justice and their new responsibilities as exciting, and it makes them feel enthusiastic, strong, and brave (Brickell 2014: 1257; Lamb et al. 2017: 1224; Morgan 2017: 1190). This spirit is further accelerated by the close relations to other female activists. Goodwin (2001: 20) speaks of the pleasure of collective emotions derived from being with like-minded others “who no longer feel like strangers,” and the joy of collective action and bravery. One activist liked to emphasize: “We can call one another and then we women go. We listen to each other!” (Interview, Boeung Kak and Borei Keila activists, Phnom Penh, 11 January 2017). These bonds of trust, loyalty, and affection lead to a sense of solidarity among female activists that partly compensates for the risks these women take and, moreover, reinforces their individual commitment (Nicholls et al. 2017: 16; Goodwin/Pfaff 2001: 288).

## **4 Reframing the Land Struggle through Gendered Contestation**

The shrinking space for civil society in Cambodia and the increasingly confrontational clashes between security forces and land rights activists have necessitated that NGOs and affected communities realign their strategies (Schoenberger/Beban 2018; Naly Pilorge, LICADHO Director, Berlin, 24 January 2018). As a result, gender has become important in framing contestation against unjust land deals. This has led to the emergence of two recent phenomena: women appear more frequently at the frontlines of public land protests and supposedly female emotions have become politicized.

### **4.1 Pushing Women to the Front of Protests**

Apart from the women’s personal motivations, NGOs have been instrumental in drawing women affected by land conflicts or eviction into contesting the corporate or state acquisition of their land (see also Morgan 2017: 1189). Throughout the interviews I conducted, female protesters across Cambodia emphasized how NGOs collaborate with



women in particular to raise awareness on land issues and train them on advocacy. This has helped to overcome or compensate for the educational barriers that women usually face – most female land activists have primary schooling, if that – but has also strengthened the women’s belief that they can make an impact and improve their situation. Women with an ethnic minority background such as the *Bunong* or *Kuoy* have disproportionately benefited from the support of civil society organizations. As a female *Bunong* activist in the north concisely put it: “NGOs train especially us women to be confident, for example to talk to company members that cut the forest. We are empowered to speak up. Before we didn’t used to do that. But we [women] gained confidence for advocacy and now understand the Cambodian law” (Interview, anti-Lower Sesan 2 Dam activists, Stung Treng, 8 June 2016).

I found that NGOs provide capacity building programs and promote women’s groups and networks for mainly two reasons. First, international aid has recently turned to the particularly promising segment of gender equality and women’s empowerment, especially in countries with significant gender inequality such as Cambodia (Pospieszna 2015: 1252). Second, women are widely believed to have a soothing effect on security personnel, authorities, and fellow (male) protesters, and thereby are supposed to help prevent outbursts of violence. Not only are men often more policed, but it is moreover assumed that women “naturally” resort to and promote non-violent advocacy and are less prone to alcohol abuse (UNEP et al. 2013; Jaquette/Summerfield 2006). Time and again, I was told by female and male community members, authorities, and civil society what a community representative summed up as follows: “Women are important when it comes to direct confrontation. Men easily explode. Women won’t get hit” (Male community representative, Sampor Lun, Battambang Province, 3 Augst 2017; see also Lamb et al. 2017: 1224). The strategic positioning of female bodies at the front of land-related protests can be traced back to lessons learned from the decade-long urban *Boeung Kak* land struggle in Phnom Penh (Brickell 2014: 1257). As those initially male-dominated protests turned increasingly violent, the communities started to send their women instead.

Today, the women-at-the-front concept is well institutionalized in land rights struggles in Cambodia, although the advantage of the female-led *Boeung Kak* protests soon diminished and female and male activists alike face police violence (LICADHO 2014; Interview, Regional Coordinator of IDI, Phnom Penh, 15 September 2016). My empirical data shows, in line with Lamb et al. (2017: 1226), that male and female community members start to see land conflict-related protests these days as “women’s work.” Moreover, important social and religious institutions have trained women accordingly. Consequently, it is women who – in spite of traditional gender norms – increasingly approach or negotiate with authorities and companies and thereby transform the state-induced atmosphere of fear into an “emancipatory productive force” (Schoenberger/Beban 2018: 4). In Preah Vihear, for example, women, alongside male community members, use to sleep in the rice fields to protect their land or seized bulldozers and detained the drivers who attempted to clear their land to expand a Chinese sugar cane plantation.

#### 4.2 Emotionalizing Resistance

The increasing visibility of Cambodian women in protests is only one side of the coin. A closer look at land-related protests in the country reveals that gender has become a cultural

resource, thereby also reshaping the quality of contentious politics (Einwohner et al. 2000: 691). I observed that civil society organizations have not only encouraged women to participate actively in public protests, as shown earlier, but they also urge female activists to engage in emotional resistance. In so doing, deliberate framings of gender in land-related protests – in fact, designing a causal story of land grabbing and eviction from a female perspective (see Stone 1989: 294) – shall ensure to evoke sympathy with their cause.

As in most societies, women in Cambodia are perceived as more emotional and better at showing emotions than men (Ahmed 2014: 170; Goodwin et al. 2001: 14; see also Lamb et al. 2017: 1224). However, publicly displaying emotions contradicts the traditional female code of conduct, and the *Chbap Srei* in particular. In other words, female activists both live up to and contradict traditional notions of womanhood through the embodiment of emotions, notably sorrow and pain, at the same time. The overt display of emotions by female activists is exceptional in a Southeast Asian context, given the cultural code of withholding emotions publicly and the notion of female domesticity. Yet, female activists who cry, yell, demonstrate helplessness, or desperately ask for the intervention of higher authorities benefit their communities' objectives in two ways: first, their behavior shames authorities and the public and, second, draws media attention to their cause (see also Lamb et al. 2017: 1226). Moreover, venting their outrage has relieved some women of their emotional stress.

In the following, I highlight two emotions that play a key role in female-led land rights protests in Cambodia: pain and shame. Pain is understood not simply as a product of harm but also entails collective traumas of historic experiences (Ahmed 2014: 34). As such, the strategic application of emotional protest aims to evoke some kind of collective response to the pain felt by communities. In post-war Cambodia, displaying suffering linked to displacement, for example, provokes a strong collective feeling rooted in the society's traumatic experience of forced eviction under the *Khmer Rouge* (see Clarke 2001: 94). Thus, (violent) eviction is not only the experience of single communities today but embedded in "a history of war, suffering, and injustice" (Ahmed 2014: 20); all the more so given the prominent role of the military, which is hired by companies to evict or threaten villagers.

NGOs and more experienced female activist groups from Phnom Penh's eviction-hit neighborhoods understood the effects of the embodiment of pain early and teach female land rights activists across the country to express their suffering verbally or through crying, by drawing on their roles as mothers and spouses. Especially the women fighting land grabs in Phnom Penh were trained to fight with words, including angry speech, "a form of non-violence used to avoid the inevitable defeat against the government's superior weapons and power" (Eisenbruch 2018: 764). Female activists have increasingly incorporated this strategy and use every opportunity to display sorrow and pain, e.g. at protest marches, petition submissions, or gatherings outside of ministries or the prime minister's house. Newspaper reports frequently comment on such displays, such as "a woman cries as Koh Kong community members gather yesterday outside the Ministry of Land..." accompanied by an image of a collapsing woman (see for example Soth Koemsoeun 2017).

In a few cases, women land rights activists have resorted to another very effective form of capitalizing their bodies: exposing their breasts. In Cambodia, taking off your clothes in public is as shameful as "a hundred times of dying" (Lilja 2016: 685). The activists defend

this intimate practice of embodying pain by referring to the immense suffering they experience through the evictions and losing their homes and livelihoods. They argue that the pain they have endured is already equal to at least a hundred deaths, so the shame of exposing their naked bodies cannot do them further harm. Following Ahmed, these women are witnesses who have experienced the pain firsthand (Ahmed 2014: 105). By exposing their bodies and thus their pain, the extent of the land grab, the state's role in "caus[ing] pain, hurt or loss" to these very communities, and the women in particular, becomes visible (Ahmed 2014: 103). In this way, the activists intend to persuade the authorities to acknowledge their wrongdoings and start an effective conflict resolution process. The Cambodian authorities, in turn, have become increasingly concerned about the women's relentless drive to hit the streets and have tried to delegitimize the protestors' embodiment of sorrow and shame. With statements such as "they make the children cry like it's the truth" (Sokhean/Wright 2016), the political elite have attempted to blame and shame female land rights activists in order to win over the public to the government's side.

## **5 Doing Harm: Risks for Female Activists**

The current Amnesty International report states that Cambodia ranks among the deadliest countries for female activists, who are at high risk of violent attacks, sexual violence, and defamation (Amnesty International 2018: 112). The government justifies its drastic measures against female (and male) land rights activists by accusing them of deliberately threatening peace in the country and of starting a revolution (Mech Dara 2017). The risks that women take come to the fore here. Evidence shows that 95 percent of women actively engaged in land struggles have received threats from the authorities, while 73 percent have experienced harassment and intimidation, and a third direct physical violence (CCHR 2016: 13). Similarly, most of my interlocutors have faced verbal and physical threats. A female activist in Preah Vihear, for example, received nightly phone calls from an anonymous man telling her he will contribute \$250 to her funeral costs (Interview, activists, Prama/Preah Vihear, 10 June 2016).

According to the widely acknowledged notion of feminine vulnerability, women should be on guard outside of the domestic sphere, as public spaces are construed as dangerous (Ahmed 2014: 69; Lilja 2016: 677). The new patterns of activism, however, have brought the land grab and its implications to the "streets, parks, and temples in the capital city and to the courts and provincial halls" (Schoenberger/Beban 2018: 12). As such, female land rights activists leave their "safe" domestic places and expose their bodies to security forces and authorities. In order to stay safe, women activists have developed specific security strategies. During demonstrations, for example, urban protesters deploy a guard system to avoid outsider-incited unrest. Security volunteers surround the female protesters and communicate via a specific sign system to keep troublemakers or agent provocateurs away from the women's space of contestation (Interview, Boeung Kak and Borei Keila activists, Phnom Penh, 11 January 2017). Yet, these guards are without exception men, and this furthers the idea of vulnerable female bodies in need of male protection.

Moreover, urban and rural women activists rely on complex networks to enforce their demands, but also for safety reasons (see also Morgan 2017: 1189). They communicate their whereabouts and activities to community members, NGOs, journalists, or through social media. In so doing, women have eked out a part of the public space that has previously been restricted to male bodies in Cambodia. This is best exemplified by a female activist in Preah Vihear Province, who is well respected in her community and perceived as knowledgeable and brave. Like other women, she underlined the importance of networks:

“I had secret meetings with the community. I told them that solidarity is important and that we need to help each other. I also requested the community to protect me, and in turn I’ll explain them how to do advocacy. They agreed, and I started to teach them about the law. One day in 2011, the police called me to meet them at the police office. The villagers wouldn’t let me go alone and so 200 families joined me. It got very crowded! [chuckles]” (Interview, community representative, Sreyang/Preah Vihear, 21 November 2016).

In addition, several women land activist networks have emerged. Some of these networks have established small saving accounts to jointly shoulder financial burdens and avert individual risks (Interview, Koh Kong activists, Phnom Penh, 27 December 2016). In times of growing mistrust, rumors, and uncertainty, even within communities, these networks do not only provide a safety net but also companionship, and offer a safe space to share problems and lessons learned.

Through the criminalization of land defenders, the state creates a constant fear that also impacts the women’s social relations (Schoenberger/Beban 2018: 14). Consequently, the risks of the women’s public activities and the unconscious embodiment of fear largely reverberate back into the domestic sphere. Almost every fourth female activist experiences domestic abuse – half of them did not until the land conflict started – which often results in divorce (CCHR 2016: 15; Brickell 2014: 1267). The reasons are manifold. Eviction-hit communities are under immense socio-economic and emotional stress, which is coupled with a sense of hopelessness, frustration, increasing male alcohol abuse, and the inability of husbands to accept the new role of (their) women (Lamb et al. 2017: 1224; Brickell 2014: 1268). Many female activists stated that they used to be “good wives,” but now they lack time to contribute to the family income, do all the household chores, look after the family, and volunteer in community projects such as malaria clinics (LICADHO 2014: 4; Brickell 2011: 441; Interview, head of community, Ou Svay/Oddar Meanchey, 8 August 2016).

In addition, physical harm, in combination with constant pressure from the authorities and their families, has led to increasing mental stress and depression among female activists (Brickell 2014: 1267; Strey Khmer 2013). Many women emphasized in the interviews that they struggle to attend campaigns and meetings, to travel long distances to the provincial capitals or Phnom Penh to bring the pain they have experienced to the streets or submit a petition, and still look after their children and prepare food. Accordingly, the women often take their children to meetings or demonstrations. One activist used the image of women having a hundred hands, because of the wide range of responsibilities and tasks that women and activists in particular must fulfill. She was obviously concerned about the sacrifices that she and her fellows make to protest and make ends meet: “Some women are very strong

when they join, but after a while they become skinny and weak, many become depressed. You know, there is pressure from the authorities and when they [the women] come home there is more pressure. Mentally there is so much pressure!” (Interview, Boeung Kak and Borei Keila activists, Phnom Penh, 11 January 2017). Especially in Phnom Penh, the marks of the long-lasting struggle on the women’s mental health and emotional well-being had started to show at the time of my research.

## 6 A Setback for Women in Cambodia?

Even though women’s rights and gender equality were introduced through peace building efforts and international organizations in the 1990s, these have largely been seen as Western concepts that disregard Cambodian values (see Porter 2013 on culturally standardized notions of women’s empowerment). Not only do societal interests, harmony, and order weigh more than individual freedom, but the ideas of everyone keeping to his or her position and the need for strong (male) leadership are deeply engrained (Brickell 2011: 441). Against this backdrop, the new agency of female activists is extraordinary, but the question arises whether it has reshaped the perception of gendered norms, and women’s roles in particular. At first glance, it seems that the increasing importance of female agency in land rights activism may reset or disrupt existing gender norms. The trauma of losing their homes and livelihoods was the match that lit the kindling for these women to depart from traditional norms (LICADHO 2014; see also Morgan 2017). Many of the female activists I spoke with said that they feel empowered by their new roles and the ability to stand up for their communities and for themselves. In line with Morgan (2017: 1187), I argue that demonstrations provide women with one of the few political opportunities to express their opinions and discontent in a cultural context where men usually speak on behalf of their wives. My empirical data suggests that these women have gained confidence, a greater understanding of politics, and knowledge of their rights. They have realized that women are able to “do more than take [their] husband’s clothes, wash them, and hang them” (Brickell 2014: 1257). This changing notion has also been mirrored in newspaper headlines, such as “Cambodia’s women activists are redefining the housewife” or “From housewife to grassroots warrior” (Brickell 2013; Retka/Odom 2017). The new leadership roles that women take over and their acts of insubordination, such as using their naked bodies to express their pain, are a warning to the government and society at large that women are willing and able to transgress traditional gender norms to make their voices heard. The Director of the *Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights* (LICADHO), Naly Pilorge, pointed out that the “tension women are facing between empowerment and submission marks how their generation represents a crucial shift away from female compliance” (Wight 2015).

The slight rise in the number of female political candidates and commune chiefs in last year’s elections furthermore indicates a promising shift in women’s participation in politics, although it does not guarantee that women’s rights and interests will be furthered (Amnesty International 2018: 112; Razavi 2003). Jumping at the chance to get involved in formal politics, a handful of exceptionally resourceful female land rights activists stood for

commune chief offices across the country. In Preah Vihear, many community members affected by a Chinese sugar cane concession supported opposition candidate and activist Khum Rany because of her bravery, popularity, leadership, and advocacy qualities, and because she embodied the community's resistance (de Bourmont/Phak Seangly 2017). Ultimately, she did not win – also because her candidacy became entangled in party politics. Nevertheless, her efforts are remarkable considering the multifaceted barriers she faced to enter politics in Cambodia, such as her gender, family background, and lack of higher formal education, to name but a few.

The numerous accomplishments of female land rights activists have not, however, translated into changing notions of womanhood in Cambodia, for two reasons. First, female activism does not contradict the essentialist view of gender roles per se, according to which women are responsible for providing food and shelter for the family. In fact, the cultural ideal of female domesticity allows women to go into politics, provided it is “an extension of their roles in the family as nurturer, caregiver, and provider of material and moral sustenance” (McGrew et al. 2004: 16). Second, the women's self-portrayal as the weaker sex, which is fortified by the over-emotionalization of resistance, perpetuates the subordinate position of women (activists) in society. The embodiment of emotions, like bursting into tears publicly, rather re-approves the image of emotional, weak, and dependent women. Consequently, although female activists have been exposed to numerous risks, their agency has not translated into access to political power, which remains closely associated with masculinity. Evidence shows that female representatives in rural areas in particular lose influence once the land conflicts are settled and, in contrast to male activists, are less likely to enter formal politics thereafter (see also Lamb et al. 2017: 1227; Morgan 2017: 1188). As a matter of fact, it takes both men's and women's efforts to overcome conventional gender norms.

While it is a sound idea to empower women to stand up for their communities and land rights, there is only a fine line between being vocal and being labeled a crazy or irrational woman. In this regard, the long-lasting repercussions of resisting land grabs for the mental health of many female activists plays into the hands of the Cambodian government, which has deliberately referred to them as emotionally unstable. Moreover, officials brand female activists as puppets orchestrated by (international) NGOs, thereby denying the women's individual agency. Even if female representatives do successfully deal with authorities and legal matters, they are likely to face long-term social stigma for not following the gender script. Until today, femininity in Cambodia is perceived to be at odds with toughness and outspokenness. As such, even strong female activists eat the humble pie and emphasize their limited capacities, knowledge, and education, and lower themselves in relation to what men can achieve. Nonetheless, the increasing number of women taking over key roles in protesting land grabs may turn sites of land dispossession into struggles over gender in the long-run. Female land rights activism in Cambodia shows that there are cracks in the notion of gender norms and female participation in politics.

## 7 Conclusion

Faced with land grabs and displacement in the name of development, Cambodian women are increasingly rising up in spite of their lower status and the deeply engrained cultural image of female domesticity. Accordingly, land activism in Cambodia has undergone a re-framing process in order to increase the movement's effectiveness and legitimacy. Adding to analyses of social differentiation in contested land deals, my findings show that despite all good intentions, promoting women's empowerment in land rights protests carries two major misconceptions. First, while the associated physical, financial, and mental risks for female activists are mostly overlooked, their enhanced role in reducing violence in protests against land grabs and eviction is overrated. Male and female land defenders alike face harassment, direct violence, and detention. Second, the capitalization of female emotions by civil society organizations has instrumentalized women's bodies, but not translated into changing notions of gender norms. While promising at first glance, the gendered reconfiguration of contentious politics rather perpetuates the perception of women as the second sex and contradicts female agency. My research on women activists at the front of rural and urban land struggles suggests that a fundamental re-thinking is needed to prevent women from being utilized as human shields. A critical self-reflection by the male-dominated NGO scene could offer a starting point here. That said, the struggle against dispossession will continue to influence Cambodia's socio-political fabric. After all, many female activists and community representatives have taken large risks and will want to participate in future decision-making processes.

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