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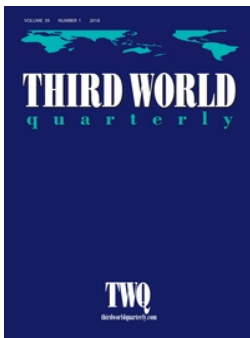
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Large-scale land deals in Sierra Leone at the intersection of gender and lineage

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ABSTRACT

There is wide engagement with large-scale land deals in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly from the perspectives of development and international political economy. Recently, scholars have increasingly pointed to a gendered lacuna in this literature. Engagement with gender tends to focus on potential differential impacts for men and women, and it also flags the need for more detailed empirical research of specific land deals. This paper draws from ethnographic data collected in Northern Sierra Leone to support the claim that the impacts of land deals are highly gendered, but it also argues that lineage in a land-owning family and patronage intersect with these gendered impacts. This data supports my claim that analysis of land deals should start from an understanding of the context-dependent, complex arrays of power and marginality. Such a starting point allows for a wider and 'messier' range of impacts and experiences to emerge.

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Introduction

A proliferation of literature on the subject of large-scale land investment accompanied the rapid increase in large-scale land investment after 2008 (shortened to 'land deals' for the rest of this article).¹ This literature engages with land deals in numerous ways, such as through investigating global patterns of land deals,² economic development in the Global South,³ policies on responsible investment and governance of land deals,⁴ agrarian reform and labour,⁵ and, more recently and to a lesser extent, gender.⁶ Most initial analyses of large-scale land investment were largely gender-blind. The absence of gender from this land investment literature has been articulated clearly.

This lacuna was rightly flagged as hugely problematic, especially given women's outsized role in agriculture in the Global South as well as the global pervasiveness of gendered inequalities. Gendered divisions of labour, gendered access to markets and capital, and gendered imbalances in decision-making power are global in scope and can be seen across all kinds of practices of development, finance, labour and global governance.⁷ That these gendered imbalances are central to the functioning of large-scale land investments through all

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stages of the deals and at all levels, from global boardrooms and international organisations to local community meetings, households and individuals, should come as no surprise.

Recent studies on land deals, such as the introduction to the 2013 *Third World Quarterly* special issue on land grabbing, and a recent study by the International Food Policy Research Institute, argue that there is a need for detailed empirical work to better understand the gendered implications of land deals.⁸ In-depth empirical research is crucial for understanding the nuances and intricacies of the impacts of land deals and how power relations mediate experiences of land loss.⁹ Gender is not the only important mediating factor. Even amongst women in the same community, different women will have different experiences with land as a result of variables such as whether or not they are part of a land-owning family. Qualitative ethnographic data can help determine which factors mediate one's experiences of land deals.

This paper starts from the premise that an empirical examination of specific land deals should consider how gender mediates experiences of those deals, as well as how lineage and patronage networks intersect with gender to produce a range of experiences. Centralising the question of power relations is important because it allows us to move beyond questions of legal status or economic market share, to the 'messier' politics on the ground. It is through looking at the 'messy' politics on the ground that we begin to see how gender, lineage, age and patronage all interact to determine who benefits from large-scale land deals and who doesn't.¹⁰ Further, we can hope to see how land deals reinforce or re-entrench existing power imbalances along cleavages of gender and lineage.

In the following section I review the existing literature on gender and land deals, as well as some of the literature on gender and land tenure/titling. The next section outlines the context of land tenure, land deals and patronage in Sierra Leone, before presenting my findings from fieldwork in Northern Sierra Leone. The conclusion suggests that a gendered analysis of land deals in Northern Sierra Leone reveals a range of detrimental impacts, both economic and social, experienced by women, but that gender must also be considered at the intersection of lineage, age and patronage networks to get a fuller grasp of differential experiences with large-scale land deals. Further, it shows some of the ways in which power imbalances, such as between men and women or between landowners and land-users, might be re-entrenched through land deals.

Land deals and gender in the literature

There are two dominant and parallel themes within the existing literature on gender and land deals. The first examines the impacts of land deals on women. Issues emerging from this theme include the unequal distribution of material and monetary benefits from lease agreements and one-off compensations, the livelihood impacts resulting from the gendered division of farm and household labour, and vulnerability to violence. A parallel theme focuses on the land tenure systems that pre-date land deals, particularly the debate around customary and individual ownership of land, and the degree to which these systems determine the decision-making power during negotiations and the distribution of economic benefits of the leases.

Daley and Pallas point out four dimensions of women's vulnerability to large-scale land deals, related to: 'productive resources, relative income poverty, physical vulnerability and

participation in decision-making.¹¹ The question of productive resources relates to women's ability to control land and the 'income from its productive use'.¹² This also contributes to the issue of relative income poverty resulting from women's underrepresentation in the formal economic sector and lack of control over productive resources. In turn, this impacts women's physical vulnerability to displacement and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Finally, political and sociocultural barriers limit women's participation in decision-making at all levels.¹³ Policy and regulatory design tend to overlook these dimensions, leaving a gender gap in global governance of land deals.¹⁴

However, other studies on rural marginalisation indicate that youth and individuals from non-land-owning families face similar barriers in accessing land, productive resources and decision-making power.¹⁵ Therefore, a gendered analysis of land deals should include perspectives on marginalised masculinities, such as through the experiences of young men and men from non-land-holding families. An argument made by P. E. Peters is extremely useful here – while not focused specifically on the recent spate of large-scale land deals, her expert and extensive analysis of land rights in Africa argues that there is a need to move beyond 'simple' questions of titling and ownership to a more complex analysis of how changing patterns of land allocation serve to empower local elites – customary and otherwise – at the expense of deteriorating relations along cleavages of gender, age and lineage.¹⁶

Daley and Pallas make several clear and important points about the gendered impacts of large-scale land deals.¹⁷ They call attention to the unequal distribution of the economic benefits of land deals at the household level.¹⁸ Since 'households often don't act as a single unit in allocating food and non-food resources, which means that all household members may not benefit from providing the male household head with more income',¹⁹ claims that land deals provide economic benefits in terms of money distributed as a result of the terms of the lease, or any employment benefit gained as a result of the project, are likely to be highly gendered in their distribution, and women are likely to lose out to male heads of household.²⁰

Chu similarly points out that discourses framing land deals as 'win-win' situations for investing companies and agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa fail to engage with the gendered risks of such investment.²¹ A study conducted by Arndt, Benfica, and Thurlow represents an example of the 'win-win' situations problematised by Chu. The study argues that increased bioenergy investment may improve women's status.²² The authors do include a variable for women's roles in the care economy, thereby illustrating their attention to gendered roles; however, they do so primarily from an economic rather than socio-cultural perspective. Their predictive model finds that under ideal conditions, including increased training and education for women, and changes to policy regarding women's employment, large-scale biofuels projects could produce sizable wage increases for women through formal employment.²³

In contrast, Millar finds that women's opportunities for employment with an ethanol project in Northern Sierra Leone are extremely limited.²⁴ Data from qualitative interviews suggests that the company only hired a small number of women, and only for a short period of time. Further, women had little opportunity to express the needs of the household when men brought home their wages from their employment. This suggests that the model put forth by Arndt et al. is overambitious in its projections for women's economic empowerment. Their use of a quantitative and econometric model might explain their inability to fully account for how power dynamics and sociocultural norms will limit the formal employment benefits of large-scale land deals. This suggests that econometric models cannot provide

enough information to adequately assess the economic costs and benefits of large-scale deals for women, primarily because they cannot adequately quantify power dynamics and local land-use practices.

Further, while Arndt et al. do concede that increased biofuels production may drive up the cost of food, they do not fully engage with the (gendered) implications.²⁵ Millar further points out that the actual wages of workers on the ethanol plantation (300,000 Leones or about \$60 USD per month) do not actually cover the cost of food that families had previously gotten from subsistence agriculture.²⁶ In relation to gender, land and food security, Chu raises the crucial point that too little attention is paid to 'the embodiment of women as both reproducers as and food suppliers.'²⁷ Such a view is extremely helpful insofar as it calls attention to population growth – a common theme in much of the food security literature, alongside questions of divisions of labour, and gendered social practices. Gendered social practices and divisions of labour also shape women's economic and livelihood opportunities during land deals, such as through the decline in the availability of firewood, foraged foods, subsistence foods and water.²⁸

Daley and Pallas also point out that despite the challenges women may face in male-headed households, female heads of household are more vulnerable to violence during the various stages of land deals. Though not specific to land deals, Izumi has a similar finding of women's increased vulnerability to violence during processes of land loss when the household is female-headed.²⁹

There is widespread agreement, in the existing literature on gender and land deals, that gendered analysis of land deals necessitates an understanding of gendered practices of land tenure more broadly.³⁰ Rights or ability to claim formal ownership or informal access to land help to mediate how one experiences the process of negotiating land deals, the forms of economic loss experienced as a result of the deals and/or the potential to derive economic benefit from them. There is a vibrant literature on women and land tenure.³¹ Much of it focuses either on legal reforms or on the economics of women's land tenure. There are multiple examples of changes to legal codes across sub-Saharan Africa that give women legal access to land. However, it is noted that the 'transformative potential of gender equal legal provisions is dependent on the competence and commitment of the political and bureaucratic actors involved.'³² This can be seen clearly in the case of Sierra Leone, where the 2007 Devolution of Estates Act gave women the legal *right* to inherit land, but where few women inherit land in practice.

This represents the gendered challenge of land reform policy: despite making legal reforms, barriers to women's land tenure still exist. Often these barriers are framed as an issue within the domestic sphere, wherein women's inability to access their legal right to land is a problem within the 'personal' realm of the household.³³ It is also frequently framed as a problem with women's legal literacy; however, this framing gives inadequate attention to the role of pervasive power inequalities between men and women, as well as between land-owning and non-land-owning families, and the wider social, economic and political systems that support these inequalities.³⁴

Razavi claims that it is necessary to contextualise the 'women and land' question within decades of orthodox liberalism in economic policies of developing countries that has not addressed inequality.³⁵ Orthodox liberalism ignores that markets are gendered institutions, as 'for the vast majority of women smallholders, market mechanisms are not likely to provide a channel for inclusion.'³⁶ She further points out that:

Simple titling and land registration do not themselves transform a customary tenure system into a freehold one – other changes are also needed for this to happen, namely the commercialisation of agriculture and the development of a land market. Hence it is the general processes of privatisation and concentration that affect women's land and property rights negatively, rather than national land registration schemes *per se*.³⁷

Changes to law are helpful in that they 'provide a benchmark' to measure women's progress as well as a resource that can be sued to advocate for women's access to resources.³⁸ However, changes in law alone are insufficient because of the 'messy' reality of power relations and inequality.³⁹ This is particularly the case 'if legal assistance and support services are not affordable or accessible for women.'⁴⁰ Furthermore, the term 'title' in and of itself can be contested. For example, in Uganda, Doss, Meizen-Dick and Bomughangi found that while households reported women as joint owners of land, this was not reflected on the official documents.⁴¹ Meanwhile, in Madagascar, Widman found that attempts to register and title lands privileged men, even though they were assumed to be 'gender-neutral' because of women's legal right to own land individually or jointly with their husbands.⁴² Merely having a right to land may not change women's status and decision-making power, particularly if it only increases their work burden or if it doesn't increase food security, as men's and women's work are accorded differential worth.⁴³ Where family and kinship ties mediate property rights, a focus on legal rights alone is insufficient.⁴⁴

While there are clear gendered inequalities with individual tenure, customary communal tenure can also be problematic, in part because such systems are particularly prone to abuse through land deals when rights are rarely formalised in legal frameworks.⁴⁵ Land users reliant on communal tenure are particularly vulnerable during land deals. Women and young men are most likely to be severely affected, and have fewer fallback options to compensate for the loss of access to communal tenure. Furthermore, in systems of customary tenure, economic benefits of land deals generally accrue to community leaders and male household heads.⁴⁶

Finally, while states frequently designate 'marginal lands' as available for land deals, the designation of lands as 'marginal' or 'unused' reflects perceptions of 'use' and value that may make sense from the neoliberal logic driving large-scale land acquisitions, but is unlikely to reflect their actual use in practice.⁴⁷ Millar argues that in the globalised context of large-scale land acquisitions, labelling land as marginal 'dis-embeds it from norms unique to specific sociocultural settings and re-embeds it within universalised norms of control and authority applied by agents of the global neoliberal transition'.⁴⁸ This designation is also unlikely to recognise how the use of 'marginal' lands is highly gendered.⁴⁹ These marginal lands sustain the care economy in many ways, such as through activities related to cooking and health, for which women are responsible.⁵⁰

The gender blindness of much of the early land deals literature reproduced gender bias insofar as it was unlikely to capture the issues most relevant to women's lives. Therefore, the literature that centralises questions of women's extra vulnerability to land deals and that examines the status of women's land tenure represents an excellent advancement in the land deals literature. I argue that attention to gender must be taken further, in two ways. Firstly, more serious analytical attention needs to be paid to the intersection of gender with other marginalities, such as lineage and age, and particularly to how systems of patronage and of land tenure produce marginalities at this intersection. Secondly, more analytical attention needs to be paid to how the land deals themselves reinforce marginalities in the

communities where they operate. This goes beyond describing the sex-disaggregated impacts of land deals by exploring how relations of power are re-asserted and/or challenged by changing conditions. It is crucial to study political power relations in the context of land deals from the bottom up, as to do so reveals the ways in which individuals and groups are marginalised in and through land deals.

Land deals in Northern Sierra Leone

Land tenure, social relations and land deals in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a significant target country for large-scale land deals. The number of large-scale land deals there has increased steadily as a part of the wider pattern of large-scale land deals across sub-Saharan Africa since the 2008 food crisis and as a result of increased global demand for biofuels produced from sugar cane and palm oil. According to the Land Matrix database, there are 661,507 hectares of contracted agricultural land deals in Sierra Leone.⁵¹ Since its emergence from a long and destructive civil war, the national government has sought international investment as part of wider post-conflict liberal peace projects.⁵²

In the provinces of Sierra Leone, the Paramount Chiefs are not the legal owners of the land, but they are seen as the 'custodians' of all of the land in their chiefdom. Customary systems of land tenure are characterised by ownership of large parcels of land by 'land-owning families' in each community. Land-owning families can trace their lineage to the 'original' inhabitants of the village, and the family includes everyone in the descent group. There is also community control over smaller plots of land for common cultivation, as well as some less frequent instances of individual ownership, such as by Big Men or Chiefs.

Within all of this variation is the common practice of excluding 'strangers' from landownership, wherein a 'stranger' is anyone who cannot trace their lineage to an original land-owning family in that community. Subsequently, one may have spent one's entire life in a community, but is still a 'stranger' when it comes to landownership. 'Strangers' can access land through a local patron, who may give them access to, but not ultimate control over, land. Lineage and descent are patrilineal, and this has been used to explain why women should not have equal opportunities for landownership. If a woman leaves her natal village to marry, her children will be strangers in her natal village – therefore, transfer of ownership from her to them would mean transferring landownership to a 'stranger'. This practice will likely complicate the efforts of the provision in the government's new land policy to give women equal rights to own land.⁵³

The role of patronage or 'Bigmanity' is important in determining political and social power in Sierra Leone. According to Utas, 'Bigmanity forms loose social webs based on the ability to gather followers.'⁵⁴ Patron–client relations are not fixed; they shift depending on the ability of the 'Big Man' to offer 'economic possibilities as well as protection and social security.'⁵⁵ Furthermore, Big Men are positioned within broader networks of social relations, and are likely to have Big Men of their own. In the context of rural Sierra Leone, resource scarcity means that Big Men provide a critical source of resources because 'The shortage of resources consolidates the power bases of patrimonial networks as their dependents have few alternative options at hand other than linking up with Big Men who can secure their access to material and social needs.'⁵⁶ Studies from the Sierra Leonean mining sector have made similar findings on the role of patronage and lineage as mediators of access to mining rights and

resources.⁵⁷ This helps to emphasise that serious analytical attention needs to be paid to patronage and lineage when examining natural resource access in Sierra Leone.

Patronage networks are frequently 'nested' within other sources of power, such as decision-making power in a land-owning family, lineage within the 'ruling house' of Paramount, Section, or Village chiefs, or leadership positions within the secret society.⁵⁸ The multiple and fluctuating patron–client relations at work within villages, sections and chiefdoms are central to the distribution of costs and benefits of large-scale land deals. Furthermore, it is also necessary to consider how the national government and investing companies have capitalised upon the role of patronage in relations between Paramount Chiefs, District Councils and communities when it comes to the negotiation of land lease agreements and the distribution of surface rents. In turn, the power of Chiefs is re-asserted through the negotiation and facilitation of land deals. This issue is similarly raised by P. E. Peters in her analysis of changes to land allocation in Africa.⁵⁹

Field research

I conducted a preliminary scoping study in Port Loko district, Sierra Leone, in May 2016. During this time I visited one-third of the communities with land under lease to two different biofuels projects. One project, in Bureh Kasseh Maconteh Chiefdom (BKM), is operated by Geoff Palm, and the other is operated by West Africa Agriculture (WAA) in Marfoki Chiefdom. I visited 11 communities over 3 weeks, and in community meetings I collected data using methods of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in addition to individual interviews.⁶⁰ The PRA methods I used included community mapping, resource mapping and trend analysis. I triangulated the data collected by these methods along with the data from individual interviews conducted with 4–9 women in each community. In addition, I conducted key-informant interviews with 11 government and civil society organisations (CSOs) stakeholders. A local research assistant (RA) was crucial to the success of this trip. He helped me to negotiate access to the chiefdoms through the Paramount Chiefs, and to the communities through the Village Heads. He was known to the communities because of his work for a local human rights non-governmental organization (NGO), and the communities' trust in him helped bestow legitimacy upon me.⁶¹ He also helped by translating community exercises, discussions and individual interviews.

I kept a reflexive journal for the duration of the research project, including phases of planning, field research and data analysis. In particular, I reflected on how my own positionality as well as the identity of my RA had a bearing on the responses of my research participants in group and individual interviews. The first entry after hiring my RA expresses that this was a primary consideration: 'I need to think about how my means into the community will shape and constrain my data. It will get me in "easily" but it will also colour who talks to me and what they say. I'll reflect more on this as I go along.'⁶² Later entries in the journal reflect that in some communities, my RA's introduction to the discussion was long winded. I reflected on my concerns that this was leading the discussion in a particular way. In these communities I worked harder to triangulate the information I got from group meetings with data gathered in individual interviews and transect walks through the communities to try to assess the reliability of what people said. When data from group meetings seemed to be refuted by transect walks (such as reports that there was no well in the village when a well was obvious) or in individual interviews (such as when women reported that they spent

more time farming rice than cassava after community meetings reported no rice being grown), I either asked more extensive follow-up questions or did rely on the disputed data to make claims.

The initial decision to hire a male RA was difficult. His dense network of connections with local leaders helped to ensure my access to communities, but I was concerned that women would feel less free to speak with him. However, once visits commenced, it was clear that he had the trust of many women in communities we visited. This was evident in the welcome they gave him as well as in several instances, unrelated to my research, where women confided in him about personal problems, and in one village where a woman came to him to report an instance of domestic violence against her relative that had occurred that morning.

Economic hardship and food insecurity

Communities and individuals systematically claimed to be suffering from increased economic hardship related to the extremely low rates of lease payment offered to land-owning families, food insufficiency, and increased reliance on buying foods and materials they used to grow or gather. Land-owning families with land leased to WAA and Geoff Palm receive 50% of the \$12 USD per hectare per year lease payment (with the remaining 50% divided among the central government, district council and Chiefdom Council). The sum distributed to land-owning families is frequently divided amongst a large number of people. One could argue that the distribution of surface rents reasserts the patronage power of heads of land-owning families because of the social capital associated with resource distribution.⁶³ Furthermore, payments from the companies are not made directly to landowners, but pass through Paramount Chiefs or District Councils, reflecting what P. E. Peters refers to as a potential source of social inequality.⁶⁴

The distribution of surface rents, as well as compensation for destroyed tree crops, is highly gendered. Across multiple communities women expressed dismay at their inability or difficulty in sending children to school.⁶⁵ Prior to the lease agreements, costs associated with school, such as for uniforms, were paid with income from tree crops such as palm. When asked, women who cited their inability to pay school costs because of loss of tree crops stated that they had not been compensated for the loss of their trees.⁶⁶ It is highly telling that the issue of non-compensation was raised almost exclusively by women, and was systematically raised by women during individual interviews but raised far less frequently during open community discussions. This supports the claims by Daley and Pallas, and Behrman et al., that the household distribution of benefits from leases is skewed towards men.

We used to get oil from the palms but the trees have been cut. We did not receive compensation for the trees.⁶⁷

The trees I used to get oil from have been cut. I was not compensated for the trees.⁶⁸

I was not compensated for the destruction of my palm trees.⁶⁹

We [women] used to have money to take care of the home from selling palm oil.⁷⁰

We no longer have access to oil; we have to buy it.⁷¹

During open community discussions it was predominately men who raised the issue of slow, late or missing surface rent payments, which is unsurprising given that the heads of

land-owning families (and thus the recipients of lease payments) are all male. During one open community discussion, a woman raised the problem of women's non-inclusion in the process of surface rent distribution:

The women are not benefitting from the surface rents. They are not benefitting from their husbands' land and they don't know where the money from the surface rents is going. The women don't know how the money is shared.⁷²

On the theme of gendered division of labour and livelihood opportunity, women frequently reported difficulties acquiring firewood, which they had previously collected from their family's upland farm plots. As a result of difficulties in acquiring sufficient firewood from the remaining farmland, now they walk long distances to nearby villages to buy firewood and charcoal, or spend more time looking for firewood on smaller plots of land. Similar circumstances surround the collection of medicinal herbs and other foraged foods. The economic impact of changes in access to firewood and medicinal herbs can be expressed in terms of the cost of having to purchase things which were previously foraged, the loss of income from selling foraged materials, and the additional burden of time required to travel farther to find materials.

We get a small amount of firewood from the riverside, but less than before. We used to have easy access to it. Now we use more charcoal, which we buy from a neighbouring village.⁷³

I had access to more firewood, and would sell the surplus. Now, I use more charcoal.⁷⁴

I have to walk too far for medicinal herbs, but I used to access them more easily.⁷⁵

We used to make charcoal to sell, but now we don't even have firewood for ourselves, we have to buy it now.⁷⁶

The economic costs and benefits of these land deals are gendered because of the division of labour, as well as decision-making power and control over surface rent income and one-off compensation payments. Women frequently referred to themselves as 'the only breadwinner' for the family, while also speaking of their increased burdens of care, such as from spending more time gathering firewood, or more time looking after children who were not in school. However, gender is also clearly not the only mediating factor for economic costs and benefits of these land deals. Since lineage determines membership in a land-owning family, it therefore also mediates economic experiences of land deals. Members of the community who cannot trace their lineage to a land-owning family, or who have not married into a land-owning family, are the first to see their share of access to land shrink. Those who lose access to land for farming but stay in the village may have to increasingly rely on patronage networks for access to material resources. In turn, this may further entrench power with a few individuals in the community.⁷⁷

There is pervasive food insecurity in communities with land under lease to Geoff Palm and WAA. Some individuals employed by the company or whose spouses are employed by the company reported that monthly wages are insufficient to purchase food for the month. Other respondents reported a marked decline in self-sufficiency in rice production, and expressed dissatisfaction that they have to resort to buying imported rice when they previously grew enough for family consumption. Multiple respondents reported that now they only eat once per day. Evidence of malnutrition and under-nutrition in children was pervasive and widespread across all communities. Multiple communities and individuals reported decreasing their rice consumption and increasing their cassava consumption. Therefore, food security in the context of these two land deals relates to the issues of food insufficiency and the consumption of less-preferred foods.

We don't grow enough rice to eat anymore. Before, we grew enough to eat and had some in reserve for the next season.⁷⁸

There is not enough to eat.⁷⁹

There is not enough to eat because we are no longer growing rice.⁸⁰

We are eating more cassava now than before, but we would prefer more rice because it is better.⁸¹

Before the deal, we didn't buy rice; we ate the rice we grew. We had sufficient food. We used to grow a lot of groundnuts, and would sell some and eat some, but now there's not enough. We mostly sell them to buy rice.⁸²

Sometimes it is only late in the evening when we get food.⁸³

There is not enough to eat because there is less land to plant on.⁸⁴

Since WAA we are only farming in our yards. There is food insufficiency and we are eating more cassava instead of rice because there is not enough land to farm.⁸⁵

The division of labour which leaves women responsible for cooking also leaves women in a particularly difficult position in relation to food security. Inability or difficulty in providing adequate food for their families was a dominant concern of almost all respondents. However, access to small plots for vegetable gardens, or for so-called 'hunger-beating' foods such as cassava, is determined through social relations, such as lineage, in-marriage to a land-owning family, or patronage. Food security for women in communities with land under lease is therefore mediated through these social relations, illustrating that while all women may have reported food insufficiency, they do not all experience that insufficiency in the same way.

Political power and community relations

Decision-making power in relation to the land deals is clearly mediated by gender, lineage and patronage in the two Port Loko land deals. In theory, land lease agreements in Sierra Leone must have free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).⁸⁶ However, this research revealed that in many communities, respondents had only a very basic understanding of the terms of the lease agreements, and some people claimed that they have never seen a copy of the lease. Furthermore, the company operating in Maforki Chiefdom, WAA, seems to be operating without FPIC from landowners. According to landowners in the WAA project area, they have not signed a lease agreement. Land-owning families say were coerced into giving their thumbprints and photos as a receipt for a 'Christmas Gift', which later turned out to be the lease agreement.

The MP [Member of Parliament] and the company PRO [Public Relations Officer] came to the village with a Christmas Gift. They said that they wanted land, and that they would come back again to talk about the plots and the conditions and to sign an agreement. They did not come back with an agreement to sign. They took the photos and thumbprints of the seven land-owning families when they received the gifts. We have not seen or signed an agreement.⁸⁷

The PRO for the company came with the MP for BKM to discuss the agreement. They said they would come back later to make the final agreement, but they brought money as a 'Christmas Gift'. The land-owning families say they never signed the agreement, but they did sign to say they received the Christmas Gift, and their photos were taken while they signed.⁸⁸

I heard the 'Christmas Gift' story in three of the four communities with land under lease to WAA. In the fourth community, landowners reported that they did not know anything about

any lease agreement until the company began clearing farmland to establish the plantation. A landowner whose land was lost to the plantation reported that the Section Chief granted permission for the lease without the knowledge of the landowners.⁸⁹ The NGO GRAIN has reported that WAA used problematic tactics to get communities to sign leases in Soro Gbema Chiefdom and Makpele Chiefdom (both in Pujehun District, Southern Province) as well.⁹⁰ It is possible that the story told by the WAA communities in Port Loko was embellished or was told to me in a particular way because of the identity of my RA, but WAA's history of using politicians and other forms of coercion to convince communities to sign leases suggests that their deal in Port Loko is also problematic.⁹¹

In BKM Chiefdom communities, men from land-owning families and village chiefs reported that there was a lease agreement with Sierra Leone Agriculture (SLA)/Geoff Palm. While not all people at the meeting agreed upon what the terms of the lease were, there was agreement that a lease did exist. In some communities landowners and/or the village leadership stated that they had not seen or did not have a copy of the lease. Even in cases where communities did agree that there was in fact an active lease, some landowners stated that they consented to the lease because the Paramount Chief (or his representative) had asked them to.

There are also obvious gendered lacunas in relation to the political and decision-making power exercised during the negotiation and signing of these lease agreements. This is most obvious upon an examination of my reflexive journal and notes from the community mapping and open discussion. Women made up a sizeable share of every community mapping and discussion exercise. In several villages, women outnumbered men by a large margin at the community meetings. In all but one village, a variety of women were extremely vocal and engaged in debate and discussion during the processes of community mapping, resource mapping and trend analysis, and in the discussion of changes in the community since the start of the deals. However, when discussing the process of negotiating the deals, the lease agreements and the delimitation of land for the lease, women were silent. The single exception came from the open discussion in one community where a woman said: 'I advised them not to sign the agreement but no one listened to me because I'm a woman.'⁹²

Power and decision-making in relation to lease agreements reflect not only gendered imbalances, but also imbalances related to lineage and patronage. In each community, there were only a small number of people speaking during discussions about the lease agreements and how they were made, reflecting the uneven distribution of landownership as well as the way decisions about land use are made by the heads of land-owning families. One final observation came from a BKM community where the discussion of the lease was very brief. In this community, my visit and community mapping had interrupted a land dispute hearing. The land dispute was unrelated to the lease agreement with SLA, but the outside mediator of the dispute was the brother of the BKM Paramount Chief. The silences in this community meeting have the potential to express the role of patronage power during the process of lease negotiation. Relations of power between heads of land-owning families and land-users are re-entrenched not only through the ability of heads of families to distribute (or withhold) surface rent payments to clients in the community, but also through the 'symbolic capital'⁹³ produced through exercising decision-making power when signing the lease agreement.

Two dominant themes on community relations emerged from this research. The first relates to the out-migration of young men, which was frequently cited as a change to the community structure. There may be a number of factors which contribute to out-migration of young men, but women frequently linked it to lack of access to farmland. When

triangulated against data from community meetings and my reflexive journal, there are instances where lack of access to land did push young men out of the community. There is also evidence that prospects for young men who remain in the community are limited.

My sons have left the village because there is no land for them to farm. A lot of young men have left their parents and their wives, leaving women particularly vulnerable.⁹⁴

Young men have left to get jobs, leaving their wives and parents behind.⁹⁵

The young men may soon have to leave the village to earn money somewhere else.⁹⁶

My children didn't ever get work with SLA. Some of them have since left the village for Freetown.⁹⁷

Women also frequently reported that the economic strain on the community and the problems with food insufficiency were increasing community tensions. This was most frequently expressed as 'A hungry man is an angry man' – a phrase that I heard at least once in every community when discussing community relations since the deals. Women also expressed that the villages were less lively, and that people were more angry. One woman said:

Things are hard in the community. People are hungry, and because they are hungry they are always angry. Because they are always angry, they are getting older.⁹⁸

Particularly in cases where they leave wives/children or elderly parents behind, the out-migration of young men may induce economic impacts for their family members in addition to altering the social structure of the village. Furthermore, the economic opportunities for these young men in nearby towns such as Port Loko are extremely limited. Increased communal tensions linked to economic insecurity, food insufficiency or tensions over the distribution of remaining plots of land may contribute to decreased social/communal security in villages with land under lease. In addition to gender, social relations of patronage and lineage will mediate how social/communal security functions. For example, existing patron–client relations may change as a result of changes in resources or benefits that patrons can distribute, or as a result of changes in clients who are available to provide labour to patrons. Such changes may have as-yet-unseen but longer term impacts on social and communal security.

Conclusion

In Northern Sierra Leone, investing companies and the national government have facilitated large-scale land deals in part through capitalising upon pre-existing customary tenure arrangements, patronage politics and the exclusion of women, young men and strangers from decision-making. This can be seen through a bottom-up examination of power relations among individuals, communities, customary and state institutions, and state relations with investing companies. Gender clearly mediates the experiences of negotiating and signing land deals, but it also intersects with patronage and lineage to determine who does and who does not have decision-making power over whether or not the deals should be signed. Furthermore, as highlighted by P. E. Peters, changing patterns of land distribution do not necessarily represent a radical rupture of the power of the local and national level elite, but instead may serve to reinforce cleavages around lineage and gender.⁹⁹

In turn, the actual operationalisation of these deals has clear gendered impacts – these are mostly clearly seen in the divisions of labour and the often 'unseen' and non-monetised activities related to the care economy. These impacts are also seen in terms of who does or

does not leave the community when land access is scarce. Again, here, gender intersects with patronage and lineage to determine how the deals are experienced. This research has revealed some of these impacts and their interplay with power relations, particularly in terms of how land-owning families may gain symbolic capital through facilitating land deals and distributing benefits, even if they are not economically better off as a result of the deals. More research is needed to more fully understand the nuances of negative and positive impacts and how they are mediated. Further research could maintain the lens of gender while focusing on additional case studies, such as in places with different pre-existing land tenure arrangements, other types of agricultural investment (such as in food production) or failed/stalled deals. Further research could also focus on a more systematic investigation of the gendered relations between investing companies, and customary and state institutions.

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Notes

1. Part of the existing literature on large-scale land investments is concerned with terminology and definitions. Here, I draw from the International Land Coalition to define large-scale land investment as the concentration and transfer of land holdings for the purpose of commercial agribusiness investment. I shorten this to 'land deals' for the purpose of convenience. For more on the debate on terminology, see Hall, "Primitive Accumulation."
2. Cotula et al., "Agricultural Investment"; and White et al., "New Enclosures."
3. Millar, "Investing in Peace"; and de Schutter, "How Not to Think of Land-Grabbing."
4. Margulis, McKeon, and Borras Jr, "Land Grabbing and Global Governance"; de Schutter, "Large-Scale Land Acquisitions"; Borras, Franco, and Wang, "Challenge of Global Governance"; and Wolford et al., "Governing Global Land Deals."

5. Edelman, Oya, and Borrás, "Global Land Grabs"; Oya, "Land Rush and Classic Agrarian Questions"; and White et al., "New Enclosures."
6. Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals"; Daley, "Gendered Impacts of Commercial Pressures"; Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals"; Wisborg, "Transnational Land Deals"; and White and White, "Gendered Experiences of Dispossession."
7. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*; Enloe, "Margins, Silences and Bottom Rungs"; and Enloe, "Bananas, Beaches and Bases."
8. Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals"; Edelman, Oya, and Borrás, "Global Land Grabs"; and Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals."
9. Bueger and Mireanu, "Proximity."
10. Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals"; Millar, "We Have No Voice for That"; and Millar, "Knowledge and Control."
11. Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals," 183.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. For example, the provisions in the 'set of core principles and measures to address the human rights challenge' of large-scale land acquisitions set forth by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food are largely gender-blind; see de Schutter, "Large-Scale Land Acquisitions."
15. See Richards, "To Fight or Farm?"; Christensen, "Big Man Business"; Maconachie, "Dispossession, Exploitation or Employment?"; Fanthorpe and Maconachie, "Beyond the 'Crisis of Youth?"; K. Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth*.
16. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict."
17. Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals."
18. Ibid., 181.
19. Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals," 51.
20. Ibid.
21. Chu, "Gender and 'Land Grabbing'."
22. Arndt, Benfica, and Thurlow, "Gender Implications of Biofuels Expansion."
23. Ibid.
24. Millar, "We Have No Voice for That."
25. Arndt, Benfica, and Thurlow, "Gender Implications of Biofuels Expansion."
26. Millar, "Investing in Peace."
27. Chu, "Gender and 'Land Grabbing,'" 38.
28. Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals"; Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals"; Daley, "Gendered Impacts of Commercial Pressures."
29. Izumi, "Gender-Based Violence."
30. Chu, "Gender and Land Grabbing"; Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals"; Osome, "Can the Law Secure Women's Rights."
31. See for example the 2014 *Feminist Economics* special issue on Women, Gender and Food Security; and Razavi, "Liberalisation and the Debates."
32. Daley and Englert, "Securing Land Rights for Women," 104.
33. Sjoberg, "Introduction to Security Studies."
34. Daley and Englert, "Securing Land Rights for Women," 103.
35. Razavi, "Liberalisation and the Debates," 1483.
36. Ibid., 1486.
37. Ibid., 1486–1487.
38. Razavi, "Introduction: Agrarian Change," 27.
39. Ibid.
40. Izumi, "Gender-Based Violence," 14.
41. Doss, Meinzen-Dick, and Bomughangi, "Who Owns the Land?," 95.
42. Widman, "Land Tenure Insecurity."
43. Rao, "Land Rights, Gender Equality," 181.
44. Ibid.

45. White et al., "New Enclosures."
46. Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals."
47. Borras, Franco, and Wang, "Challenge of Global Governance," 167; White et al., "New Enclosures."
48. Millar, "Knowledge and Control."
49. Rossi and Lambrou, "Gender and Equity Issues."
50. Behrman, Meinzen-Dick, and Quisumbing, "Gender Implications of Land Deals"; and Daley and Pallas, "Women and Land Deals."
51. LandMatrix, "Online Public Database."
52. Cramer and Richards, "Violence and War in Agrarian Perspective"; Richards, "To Fight or to Farm?"; and Millar, "Investing in Peace."
53. Government of Sierra Leone, "National Land Policy."
54. Utas, "Introduction," 8.
55. Ibid.
56. Christensen, "Big Man Business," 65.
57. Maconachie, "Dispossession, Exploitation or Employment?"; Fanthorpe and Maconachie, "Beyond the 'Crisis of Youth?'; K. Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth*.
58. Christensen, "Big Man Business"; and Leach, *Rainforest Relations*.
59. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict."
60. Narayanasamy, *Participatory Rural Appraisal*.
61. For reflection on the methodological value of using a motorcycle to travel to communities, see Ryan, "Oporto! Oporto!"
62. Author's reflexive journal, May 2016.
63. Christensen, "Big Man Business"; Maconachie, "Dispossession, Exploitation or Employment?"
64. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict"; Fanthorpe and Maconachie, "Beyond the 'Crisis of Youth?'"
65. In some communities, large numbers of school-aged children were not in school during the research visit, corroborating claims that many children are currently out of school.
66. There are some records of tree compensation in the Port Loko Ministry of Agriculture district office. It was not possible to verify which land-owning families had received compensation for tree crops.
67. Woman attending community meeting, community #10, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
68. Individual interview with woman, community #10, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
69. Individual interview with woman, community #6, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
70. Individual interview with woman, community #8, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
71. Individual interview with woman, community #9, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
72. Woman attending community meeting, community #8, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
73. Individual interview with woman, community #1, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
74. Individual interview with woman, community #11, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
75. Individual interview with woman, community #2, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
76. Individual interview with women, community #9, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
77. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict."
78. Individual interview with woman, community #10, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
79. Individual interview with woman, community #10, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
80. Individual interview with woman, community #11, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
81. Community discussion, community #2, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
82. Community discussion, community #9, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
83. Individual interview with woman, community #7, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
84. Individual interview with woman, community #8, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
85. Individual interview with woman, community #4, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
86. FAO, "Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance"; Government of Sierra Leone, "National Land Policy"; and Government of Sierra Leone and FAO, "Draft Guidelines."
87. Village Chief in open community discussion, community #10, Maforki, May 2016.
88. Village Chief in open community discussion, community #9, Maforki, May 2016.
89. Landowner in open community discussion, community #11, Maforki, May 2016.

90. GRAIN, "Farmland Grab in 2016."
91. All three of these leases have since been sold; the lease in Makpele is currently being operated by Natural Holdings, a Dutch company. It is unclear who is operating the leases in Maforki and Soro Gbema. Personal correspondence with GRAIN and Natural Holdings, January 2017.
92. Woman in community discussion, community #8, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
93. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict," 295.
94. Individual interview with woman, community #2, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
95. Woman during community discussion, community #4, Maforki Chiefdom, May 2016.
96. Woman during community discussion, community #3, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
97. Individual interview with woman, community #5, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
98. Individual interview with woman, community #8, BKM Chiefdom, May 2016.
99. P. E. Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict."

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