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## Women, Territories and Land Ownership. Reflections from Women in Mexico on Why We Want Land

*Women's struggle for full and dignified recognition of their lives and territories starts with not allowing the privatizing and extractive model to progress. However, it must be resolved by the need for women to be able to make decisions to strengthen collective political control.*

### **Women and Access to Land in the World**

Peasant agriculture produces up to 80% of the food in non-industrialized countries, and women produce 60-80% of this portion. Women also have a crucial role in conserving forests and biodiversity on our planet. Despite this fact, **only 30% of rural women own agricultural land, and they do not have access to the means of production** (1). The capitalist and patriarchal system organizes and regulates the work of women and men under a sexual division of labor, taking advantage of the unpaid and invisible care work of women in their homes and communities. Most women assume social reproduction tasks—such as defending land and territory and taking care of water and biodiversity,—and at the same time they participate in, or are responsible for agricultural or forestry production, management and/or transformation (2).

**Rural women are responsible for more than half of food production worldwide. However in terms of land ownership, they are clearly at a disadvantage compared to men.** Institutional or kinship mechanisms have deliberately put men in place as those capable of managing the family and dealing with the demands of agriculture and livestock. Of the total credits that go to the countryside, women receive between 10% and 15% of the technical assistance for this sector (3).

### **Women in Latin America**

The FAO's Atlas of Rural Women in Latin America and the Caribbean provides an overview of how we continue to place **rural women in a situation of political, social and economic inequality**. It recognizes that the percentage of land owned by women is low. In Brazil this percentage is 12.7%, in Mexico 15.7% and in Argentina 16.2% (4).

Furthermore, there is an **expansion of extractive cutting projects** such as tree monocultures, mining and the agribusiness model, among others. **The implementation of these projects is tied to processes of violence, militarization and paramilitarization in territories, and in particular on women's bodies.** Extractive projects clearly jeopardize women's ways of production and reproduction of life; and women often fight different battles in defense of their territory and in their struggle for recognition of their land rights. The combination of these factors limits women's autonomy and further impoverishes them. Often the inclusion of women through job creation in extractive projects allows companies to comply with a gender "quota" required under corporate policy. This ignores the enormous benefits to companies in territories who profit from the plunder of common goods, women and their bodies.

**As exploitation and control of capital in territories increases, exploitation and control over the**

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**work and lives of women increases.** These two “resources” are at the same time indispensable, and considered to be infinite and flexible in the process of profit accumulation (5).

This extractive approach **intensifies the invisibilization of care work and the lack of access to land.** This in turn has a particularly negative impact on women, as decisions about territory and common natural assets are directly tied to land rights or land ownership. This is vitally important, in light of the expansion of extractive projects throughout the world.

**Even within communities with forms of collective property, there are patriarchal structures that often do not recognize the role of women in collective work and the reproduction of life.** Nor do they allow the effective participation of women in decision-making spaces, despite the fact that women are the ones who actively participate in sustaining the struggles to defend their lands from the influx of extractive projects.

### ***Mexico and Land Tenure***

In Mexico, this is no exception. Although in terms of land ownership and forest tenure, for example, 80% of forests are in the hands of *ejidos* (collective lands) and indigenous and peasant communities, the patriarchal organization system that exists in these communities generally favors men when it comes to land access (6).

Furthermore, when women access land and become agrarian subjects by inheriting land or obtaining it after purchase or a years-long lawsuit, **they face dispossession by their own family members, assemblies or neighbors.** For example, figures from 2015 obtained by the Center for Women's Rights in Chiapas in the southern part of the country reported more than 100 cases of dispossession complaints for that year (7).

**The destruction of collective ownership in Mexico** began in 1992 with the reform of constitutional article 27, which **encouraged privatization of social and collective property through the promotion of agrarian certification programs.**

To this effect, programs such as PROCEDE (*Program for Certification of Rights to Ejido Lands*), FANAR (*Support Fund for Agrarian Nuclei without Regularization*) and RRAJA-FANAR (*Program for Regularization and Recording of Agrarian Legal Acts*), **make individualization of land through obtainment of property titles a condition for communities and ejidos to access rural government programs.**

### **Women and Land Tenure. Why Do We Want Land? Some Reflections**

Women have developed age-old knowledge as well as holistic forms of management of common natural assets, including forest and agricultural lands, water, seeds, uses and transformations. We are also **active political subjects in the struggles to defend our territories**; it is inaccurate to say that we only participate in managing them.

There are many experiences in Mexico that suggest that communities become stronger in the collective and participatory exercise of their land rights. These are the communities who defend their land and territory best. However, there is still a long way to go to stop reinforcing structures where men make decisions, structures which perpetuate the system of inequality over territories and women's bodies. **Strengthening assemblies that recognize women's land ownership rights creates more robust decision-making processes in territories.**

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Local experiences in Guerrero, Chiapas and Oaxaca in southern Mexico shed light on the **alternatives that communities are building to recognize women's land rights**. One example is the creation of assemblies with mixed commissions in charge of writing chapters on women's rights. These aim to recognize people's social and collective ownership, and they are opposed to privatizing projects that dispossess (8). Likewise, an initiative designed to support family ownership of land promotes women's and men's equal rights to be recognized as members of the communal collectives and *ejidos*, as well as the recognition of land as family property. This initiative points to the need for women—beyond recognized rights—to be able to have a voice and make decisions in their communities, in order to strengthen political control in the face of the onslaught of privatization processes wanting to set up in territories.

Lorena Cabnal of Guatemala offers some reflections from a community feminism perspective that also enrich this struggle. She says, *"I do not defend my land-territory just because I need the natural goods to live and to leave a decent life for other generations. In considering the recovery and historical defense of my body-earth territory, I assume the recovery of my expropriated body, in order to give it life, joy, vitality and pleasures, and to build liberating knowledges for decision-making. (...) From this perspective, all forms of violence threaten existence, which should be complete"* (9).

**The survival of life depends on social spaces of production and reproduction.** These initiatives reaffirm forms of ownership where communities continue to protect their access to land through models of collective ownership. This is in the face of the wave of projects that not only wish to restrict rural investment public policy; they also compromise models that are defending the "life project" from the imposition of privatization and projects that dispossess.

As Gladys Tzul Tzul of Totonicapan Guatemala says, (2014) *"as indigenous and peasant women, we do not just seek recognition of land access, we seek full participation: Our stories are part of a long succession of collective events that have built political paths of struggle, wherein the material means of reproduction are at the center of the debate. (...) If our social relationships produce community, then we must think seriously about organizing and creating forms of responsibility and shared work between women and men; because care work does not have to be at the expense of women's health. We also have to create ways in which we fully participate, not only in the use of communal lands, but also in decision-making processes about the collective"* (10).

**Thus, the quest for recognition of land rights begins with not allowing a privatization model to advance upon territories. But it must take place under the precept of absolute recognition of the land rights of women** and our role in the reproduction of life and creation of community; as well as recognition of the strength of our memories, and the bravery of our daily lives. This means guaranteeing women's rights to full participation in the social, political and economic life of communities, as well as guaranteeing access to water, seeds and the means of production and marketing with autonomy and freedom.

**Claudia Ramos Guillén**, [crguillen.2014@gmail.com](mailto:crguillen.2014@gmail.com)

Agroecologist with experience working in processes to defend forests and biodiversity in indigenous and peasant communities in southern Mexico.

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