

Ageing in debt: The struggles of elderly women cassava farmers in Northwest Cambodia

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Abstract (if available)

Rural livelihoods are being dramatically transformed by uneven agrarian political economies. However, the intersections between agrarian transitions and the struggles of ageing farmers in the Global South remain largely unexplored. This paper sheds light on the 'hidden geographies of ageing' amongst rural women cassava farmers, revealing how they are disproportionately impacted by intensifying capitalist relations. We examine ageing women's lives and struggles drawing on farmer interviews in the Northwest of Cambodia, weaving their accounts with an analysis of rural livelihoods conducted with farmer households using a quantitative baseline survey and interviews with village leaders. We analyse their concerns and desires associated with cassava production, as they negotiate and respond to environmental changes, pest and disease management, declining yields, and price volatility. We pay attention to their experiences in the context of rural mobilities, limited access to labour, and financial hardships. In facing the emotional, time, financial, and material burdens of the agrarian transition, ageing women frequently fall into a debt cycle as part of their efforts to maintain control over their land and farming livelihoods, while younger generations migrate in search for better economic opportunities. For many, this translates to selling/renting their land and assets and, in some cases, sacrificing food intake to pay debts. Life in this rural context is precarious, as women are gradually dispossessed from their land, farming livelihoods, labour networks, and family support as they age. These findings highlight the importance of foregrounding the gendered and aged struggles of rural farmers as central in the context of agrarian transitions.

Current stage

This publication was submitted to review at Geoforum. It was rejected with major revisions requested, which are underway.

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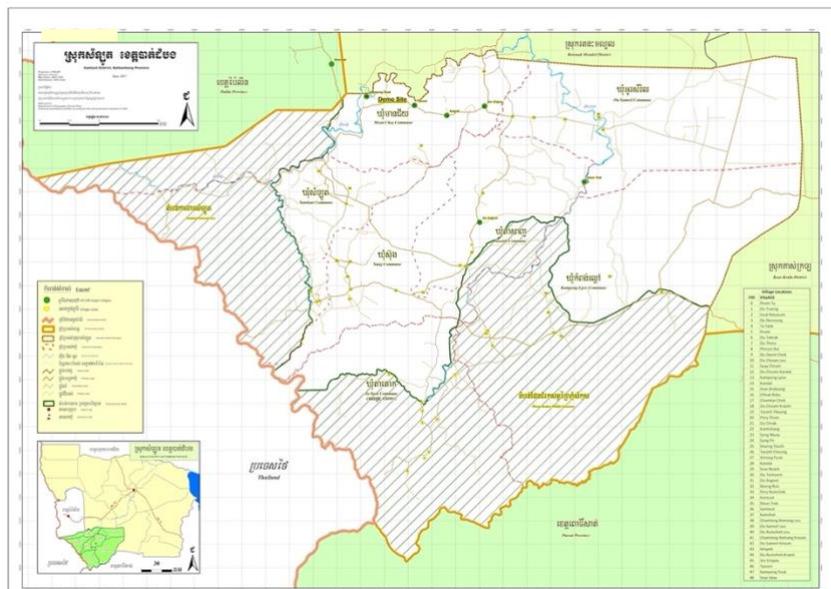
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Methodology

We analysed 34 interviews with ageing women from five villages in the Samlout District. We defined ageing women as those aged 50 and older. Although this categorisation is arbitrary, the grouping allowed us to include all the interviewees who expressed being/feeling old or experiencing social, physical, and health limitations associated with age.

We situated the lives and struggles of these women by drawing on 107 interviews with other farmer households (women under 50 (65) and men (43)). Furthermore, 406 livelihood surveys with smallholder households, and 13 interviews with village leaders, were used to contrast and contextualise the perceptions and experiences of ageing women.



Policy relevance

- *Ageing women cassava farmers remain in the shadows of agrarian frontiers.*
- *Ageing women are disproportionately impacted by cassava's capitalist relations.*
- *Environmental change and debt are driving ageing women's limited labour support.*
- *Debt is changing ageing women's reproductive labour and time constraints.*
- *To pay their debts ageing women are being dispossessed from their land and limiting their food intake.*

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