



Donny Meertens. *Elusive Justice: Women, Land Rights, and Colombia's Transition to Peace.* Critical Human Rights Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-32560-2.

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Women and Land Rights in Colombia

Donny Meertens's *Elusive Justice: Women, Land Rights, and Colombia's Transition to Peace* provides an incisive and necessary critique of Colombia's land restitution program. Others have highlighted the historic and positive ways that gender has been incorporated in the land restitution program and the later 2016 Peace Accord. In contrast, Meertens elucidates how the gender-transformative capacity of the land restitution process was still limited on the ground and failed to provide comprehensive gender justice through the granting of land titles to victims of conflict. The frictions that Meertens describes, and their resulting shortcomings in gender justice outcomes, show the folly of believing that "it was possible to create a better society in a pen stroke" (p. 10).

Land was a valuable commodity in the Colombian civil war, becoming what Meertens describes as a "threefold political-economic asset," where land granted territorial and political control, coca growing capacity, and capitalist accumulation from other natural resources (p. 5). Due to its value, many peasants—particularly widowed peasant women—were displaced from their land by local elites, paramilitaries, and guerillas, and were forced to migrate to urban centers. When the

Victims and Land Restitution Law was amended in 2011 to designate people who had been internally displaced by the Colombian conflict as "victims," the land restitution program that had already existed could then be accessed by displaced peasant women.

Meertens's work does not implement the traditional "formulation-implementation-evaluation" cycle of policy analysis to dissect this development. Instead, it employs a socio-anthropological approach to examine the discursive practices that follow that cycle, as well as examines the narratives of women and judges involved in the land restitution process. Through this, Meertens illuminates the tension between the concept of gender justice through restitution and two crucial barriers: a development model that continues to threaten peasant livelihoods and a traditional gender order that still pervades rural communities and families.

In the first two chapters, Meertens provides brief analyses of how gender has been included in other post-conflict land restitution programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, Uganda, and Bosnia. This serves to point out what shortfalls have been seen in other cases, and specifically what commonalities

ies can be seen between cases of failure. Meertens also lays out a history of women's relationship to land within Colombia, noting the similarities of how the Colombian case may fall prey to known shortfalls of aforementioned gender-conscious land restitution programs. However, Meertens also calls attention to the specificity of the Colombian case, noting the need to separate the concepts of dispossession and displacement. It is in this complexity that Meertens situates her work: in a terrain fraught with dispossession and capitalist land accumulation, within a conflict where women bore a disproportionate share of violence, and embedded in rural communities where patriarchal gender dynamics still prevail, Meertens asks how (and if?) land restitution policy—even when conscious of gender—can provide gender justice.

The result is a work that stresses the need for post-restitution action. Though the Colombian land restitution policy was an important step forward, its results were “piecemeal and patchwork,” especially for women (p. 151). Land titling and property formalization did nothing to address gendered insecurity, which still remained at the microlevel of family and community. Further, continued gendered conceptions of the private-public divide still fail to recognize women's contributions to peasant economies. Thus, while land restitution formalized property rights for many peasant women, it did nothing to address other power dynamics rooted in gender. It provided land in a scatter of plots across rural areas, lacking any network of community support or women's organizations to link them. As a result, many narratives that Meertens examines show little capacity for women in these situations to recreate the “autonomous life project” that had been torn from them years ago through dispossession (p. 151). Instead, they opted to wait out the two-year “no sale” period, sell their newly titled land, and leave.

To address these shortcomings, Meertens provides several policy recommendations, includ-

ing—most important—the need for the enhancement of women's organizational capacity within the institutions of land restitution. Though Meertens is brief in outlining what this may look like in practice, the book nonetheless provides a compelling argument for its necessity, if not a thorough prescriptive description of future action. Through such efforts, a participatory “collective appropriation” of the restitution process by women could lead to a democratization of land ownership and more inclusive land reform in Colombia. In this call, Meertens's work provides a critical and vital voice.

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