

The impact of land rights and deforestation on women in the Colombian Amazon

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In recognition of today being international women's day, I want to start out with a story about the Quebradeiras de coco babassu, or the babassu breakers, a group of women in the southeast Amazon who rely on the babassu palm tree to make soap, flour, oil and charcoal. This picture is from the 8th regional meeting of the quebradeiras, where more than 250 women attended. Babassu palm forests are being clear cut for soy and cattle in this area of the Amazon, and where trees do remain, new land ownership laws may prevent the quebradeiras from accessing the trees.

Rights to land in the Amazon may not be the first cause of deforestation that comes to your mind. Soy plantations, cattle grazing, or the forest fires that ravaged the Amazon last year may be in the forefront. However, looking into why these forest fires are occurring and why the land can be cleared for soy and cattle often leads to innocuous sounding laws regarding rural land development and private property. Many of these require some sort of "improvement" to the land in order to claim land ownership, which often involves clearing of forests. In many parts of the Amazon, indigenous peoples and other traditional communities have lacked secure ownership to lands they have occupied for centuries, and many have been driven from their land due to conflict and extractive activities. This matters for what happens to the forest.

Women often rely on forests in a different way than men. For example, the quebradeiras are almost exclusively women, while men do not utilize the babassu palm at all. Therefore, women have more reason to advocate for the sustainable management of the babassu forests.

My research will aim to understand how deforestation, land ownership and women's access to land impact the livelihoods of forest dependent women in the Colombian Amazon. Deforestation in the Colombian Amazon has increased dramatically since 2016, when the Colombian peace deal was finalized, ending over 50 years of civil conflict with the revolutionary armed forces of Colombia, or the FARC. I will examine how conflict can affect rights to land, and how insecure land rights could lead to deforestation. I plan to engage both indigenous and non-indigenous communities that have been impacted by conflict and who rely on forests for their livelihoods.

The conclusions of this research may shed light on the link between conflict, land rights and deforestation - all pressing issues for many forested areas of the world, which will likely be exacerbated by climate change and other global shocks such as the COVID 19 pandemic that could impact both migration and supply chains to rural areas. Having a better understanding of these issues will improve rural community and forest policy development. Thank you!