

Alicia Bossert

Agricultural Commercialization in Ratanakiri, Cambodia: Improving or threatening the food security of Indigenous female small-scale farmers?

Abstract Bachelor's Thesis, University of Hohenheim 2024

Agricultural commercialization, coupled with improvements in infrastructure, has the potential to boost household income through participation in profit-oriented markets. This aims to ensure year-round access to a diverse range of produce and thereby promotes adequate nutrition. While these advancements have significantly improved livelihoods for many in the Global South over recent decades, not all social groups can benefit equally. Indigenous female small-scale farmers are particularly vulnerable, facing the risk of being relegated to roles that limit their autonomy and threaten their food security.

Ratanakiri, a province in Cambodia with a substantial Indigenous population, has recently experienced significant agricultural transformations. However, research on the implications of agricultural commercialization for Indigenous female small-scale farmers remains limited. This thesis reviews scientific research, literature reviews, and reports predominantly focused on Ratanakiri over the last two decades. It evaluates the effects of agricultural commercialization on the food security of Indigenous female small-scale farmers in Ratanakiri. To do so, the sustainable livelihood approach and the five domains of female empowerment are employed to assess how gender disparities and evolving roles influence their access to essential resources and affect their food security.

Existing studies suggest that small-scale farmers in Ratanakiri face significant challenges due to agricultural commercialization, often accompanied by gender and ethnic disparities. Indigenous women are particularly disadvantaged by land dispossession, restricted access to forest resources, and limited opportunities for alternative income sources such as wage labor. Within households, gender disparities are evident in time allocation and control over productive resources. As the agricultural focus shifts to commercial crops, husbands often assume control and decision-making power over the management of agricultural land, further marginalizing Indigenous female small-scale farmers from their roles as autonomous agricultural experts. Despite this, they retain control over household income, which provides some autonomy and the ability to purchase diverse and nutritious food items. However, as Indigenous women take on additional productive work while continuing to be the primary caregivers at home, their heavy workload threatens their ability to prepare adequate and nutritious meals for their families.

With limited autonomy over productive resources such as agricultural land, forest resources, and income opportunities, female small-scale farmers in Ratanakiri struggle to sustain their livelihoods. This situation further jeopardizes their food security, as they have few options to navigate a volatile commercial market on which they increasingly depend. Despite these challenges, many resource-poor Indigenous women strive to adapt to new roles and lifestyles to secure their families' livelihoods. To encourage this progress, support from the government and NGOs should prioritize knowledge exchange and the application of gender sensitive approaches. However, extended research on Indigenous female small-scale farmers in Ratanakiri is crucial to better understand the unique challenges and nuances affecting their livelihoods and food security.