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Credit, land and survival work in rural Cambodia: Rethinking rural autonomy through a feminist lens

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Abstract
This article explores the trajectory of three rural, precarious Cambodian women as they deploy land as a means of undertaking survival work in Cambodia. Using a gendered lens vis-à-vis the concept of autonomy, this article rethinks distress sales of land and collateralized land for microfinance borrowing as forms of everyday autonomy. By highlighting women’s central role in undertaking social reproductive labour to reproduce the rural household, these acts of distress land sale and debt-taking are understood as forms of ‘survival work’, acts that ensure the day-to-day survival of the household and form the basis for broader projects of autonomy. Although we remain ambivalent about the long-term prospects for resistance through credit-taking in particular, we ultimately highlight the need for greater attention to variegated oppositional agency in the path to autonomy to understand the gendered labour of everyday survival in rural life.

KEYWORDS
Cambodia, debt, gender, land, rural, social reproduction

1 | INTRODUCTION

Feminist thinkers since the 1960s have highlighted the centrality of invisible, unwaged work—biological, material and care-based (Bhattacharya, 2017)—to women’s daily reproductive struggles and emphasized in turn how this (re)shapes their subject positions vis-à-vis both capitalism and patriarchal relations within and beyond the household.
This article rethinks how distress land sales and collateralized land—two acts that are not generally associated with forms of land-based autonomy—constitute everyday forms of autonomy through the gendered work of survival. Studies on rural autonomy today speak to the enduring ability of small-scale producers across the world to remain insulated from market integration, largely as commodity producers (Schneider & Niederle, 2010; van der Ploeg, 2008). They also highlight collective political projects to build alternatives to neoliberal production away from the hegemony of state control (Vergara-Camus, 2014; Wolford, 2003). Increasingly, scholars explore how autonomy through integration into labour markets can also manifest as a form of autonomy (Brown, 2019; Henderson, 2019). Yet such accounts by and large assume a normative notion of autonomy, and therefore of resistance, from a male subject position. Autonomy tends to be a grandiose political project or centred on a (male) ‘peasant’ drive for insulation from markets. Feminist analyses of women’s distinct contribution to the forging of autonomy tend to argue for greater valorisation of women’s gendered material provisioning (see, e.g. Turner et al., 2020) rather than interrogating how this may resituate autonomy itself for different gendered subjects, and crucially, without foregrounding the gendered labour that goes into male-centred projects of social change. Varied and everyday strategies for autonomy, and processes leading to autonomy, are less interrogated within accounts evidencing rural autonomy.

This article follows the stories of three rural Cambodian women in the village of Svay Srok,1 from the post-Khmer Rouge era to the present day. In Cambodia, over 30 years on from the onset of a rapid neoliberal transformation, 61% of the country’s inhabitants continuing to reside in rural areas (NIS, 2020). Despite the country’s transition to industrial and services sector-led growth, the relative decline of agriculture in terms of its contribution to the national economy (World Bank, 2019a) and the increasing trend for labour migration within and beyond the country (Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2020), rural inhabitants remain largely tied to homestead land, albeit on highly precarious terms. Land offers a focal point from which to understand strategies of autonomy, given its centrality to Marxist conceptions of rural autonomy, whereby the so-called freedom from land tenure for peasants also compels them into greater dependency upon capital for their reproduction (Marx, 1976). This article therefore focuses on distress land sales and collateralized land and draws on feminist thinking to (re)situate these acts as forming the groundwork for rural autonomy.

This article makes two arguments that have implications not just for different types of autonomy based on gender but also methodologically for the reimagining of rural autonomy from the ground up. Firstly, in a similar vein to Katz’s (2004) re-rendering of ‘resistance’, we highlight that women’s autonomy is not always a grandiose project, but also constituted of incremental, everyday acts that ensure survival and form the basis for larger projects. These acts reveal women’s role in reproducing agrarian life within and beyond capitalist production relations through the everyday work of social reproduction. We argue specifically that Cambodian women’s distress sales of land and reusing of land as collateral for microfinance borrowing constitute forms of ‘survival work’. ‘Survival work’ calls for an expansive conceptualization of work (Brickell, 2020), which recognizes the gendered labour that underpins everyday survival for rural households across the Global South (Ossome & Naidu, 2021).

Secondly, we argue that acts of survival that result in deeper market integration into finance markets simultaneously render women more dependent on markets whilst also constituting a temporary path towards an aspirational autonomy. This duality exists in a wider context of inadequate labour markets, a squeeze on rural production, and the increasing insecurity forged through climate and environmental change. As Bernstein (2006) has argued, the agrarian question of capital is arguably resolved given the almost-complete penetration of capital in the countryside. The new question of labour thus rests on asking how hundreds of millions of rural working poor, ‘classes of labour’ combine waged work and petty production to make ends meet. In seeking to explore this question, we draw on work that stresses the complex role of exploitative small-scale credit as both extractive and emancipatory (Guérin & Venkatasubramanian, 2020) to understand women’s deeper entanglement in finance markets through their subject.

1This is a pseudonym. All place and person names in this article are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of research respondents.
positions. As such, we suggest that autonomy through the market needs to be both understood vis-à-vis wider structures and through gendered subject positions.

After providing fuller information on the research methods and field sites explored in this article, five sections follow. The first details broader debates on rural autonomy and land; the second develops our theoretical framing through feminist contributions to the field; and the third provides contextual understanding of rural precarity in Cambodia. In the fourth section, we explore the trajectories of three rural women in Svay Srok village, focusing on how their use of land vis-à-vis autonomy must be understood through centring the survival work they undertake in reproducing the household day-to-day. Fifth and finally, we offer conclusions linking analysis back to our theoretical discussion.

2 RESEARCH METHODS AND CASE STUDY

Our focus on three women's stories forms part of a larger suite of material we collected and analysed for a 3-year study (2017–2019) investigating debt bondage in Cambodian brick kilns. The project addressed the working conditions characteristic of brick production; the conditions that engendered entry into brick work; the origins of bricks used in major Phnom Penh construction projects; and the supply chains that funded them (see Brickell et al., 2018).

The first phase of research in 2017–2018 encompassed a set of 51 semi-structured interviews undertaken with brick workers, brick kiln owners, former brick kiln workers, local administrators and other authority figures working in areas of brick production around Phnom Penh. This phase collected data on the conditions involved in undertaking brick work and the conditions that drove people to enter the industry. In addition, it involved the collation of data on ‘sender villages’—villages with high levels of outmigration to brick kilns, which would later form the basis of a quantitative survey of sender village conditions. During the second phase, undertaken in 2018, a total of 308 quantitative interviews were conducted in three sender villages located between 30 and 90 min from key sites of brick production. Within each village, every household with members involved in brick work was surveyed, alongside a randomized sample of non-brick-working households. Each household was asked questions on livelihood, assets, health and their experience of the climate in order to establish the specific vulnerabilities that engender entry to brick work. A third phase of research in 2019 involved the project team returning to one of the three sender villages, Svay Srok, and undertaking 17 oral life history interviews with indebted households, both those with family members working on brick kilns and those without. These interviews form the main basis for subsequent analysis in this article, although the aforementioned material is drawn on to provide wider context.

Svay Srok is located under a kilometre from the banks of the Mekong River as the crow flies and about 2-h drive from Phnom Penh. The village is accessible by a rough, dirt track and spreads behind the immediately visible wooden houses on the road itself to smaller plots and houses accessible through small alleys, which back on to expansive agricultural land. The village is largely a dry one, as access to Mekong waters through a canal system dried up over a decade ago through lack of adequate maintenance. Forty-three per cent of villagers own agricultural land; of this, only 9% is irrigated, so the village is characterized by high levels of labour outmigration and non-farm work given the erratic nature of rain-fed farming.

This article focuses on three women: Kalliyan, Chamreoun and Mony. These women are mothers and grandmothers and are understood here as being among ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein, 2006)—that is, classes undertaking a fragmented range of labour and subsistence activities, but who largely make ends meet through the sale of their labour power. All three women have sold and/or mortgaged land, agricultural and homestead, for their households to survive. The article explores each of their stories to re-envision these land sales and collateralized land as acts of everyday autonomy.

Throughout the research process, the majority of qualitative interviews were conducted in Khmer and transcribed into English, whereas quantitative data were collected and recorded in Khmer by a trained native speaking research team. The final stage of interviews on which this article relies were conducted by an experienced Khmer research assistant and an English-speaking academic.
From April 1975 to January 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime, headed by Pol Pot, led a process of mass violence and genocide, killing over one-quarter of Cambodia's population of 8 million people (Hughes, 2003; Strangio, 2014). This short period of 3 years and 9 months remains the most infamous in Cambodia's past and is often depicted as a key moment of unprecedented violence in the country's trajectory. The Khmer Rouge's short reign had lasting and notably geographical impacts on the country's population. Urban populations were forcibly uprooted from cities and towns to turn an apparently culturally corrupt and economically and politically exploitative urban class into a seemingly new and productive people. Those who could not transform, chose not to, or who were considered a threat to the revolution, were imprisoned or eliminated. Along with rural ‘base’ populations, they (‘new people’) were integrated into mass infrastructure-building and agricultural production processes. The Khmer Rouge physically demolished dwellings and even entire villages, collectivizing the transfer of homes, titles and property statuses. During this time, women's roles were removed as well as expanded. For example, although women were forced to undertake activities and perform roles that had been restricted to men (such as ploughing) (Kumar et al., 2000), they simultaneously lost control of their primary areas of recognized authority concerning the household and finances.

In early 1979, Cambodian attacks on border towns and villages along the Vietnam border and reports of the decimation of the Vietnamese community led to a force of 120,000 Vietnamese entering Cambodia, reaching Phnom Penh and ousting the Khmer Rouge (Strangio, 2014). Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was replaced by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which ruled throughout the 1980s. The mobility of the population to return ‘home’ and the social chaos that ensued after the collapse of tight DK control resulted in low rice production in 1979. Consequently, people consumed even draught animals and rice seed, which when compounded by a drought in the 1979–1980 planting season led to severe food shortages. Thousands of people, especially elderly people and children, died of starvation. At the same time, outside powers once again took sides, and Cambodia ‘reverted to a second, more low-intensity albeit still massively debilitating civil war between the PRK government and the alliance of anti-PRK guerrilla groups operating out of refugee camps on the Thai border’ (World Bank, 2006, p. 5), driven in large part by the US’ continued support for the Khmer Rouge in this decade (Strangio, 2014). This conflict continued throughout the 1980s with Cambodia remaining closed to most of the world, except for the presence of some aid agencies (Neupert & Prum, 2005).

Emergency food relief to Cambodia took place under the supervision of United Nations agencies. People's lives subsequently improved as they took up residence and began to re-engage in agricultural and commercial activities. The PRK introduced a semi-socialist economic system in which factories, land and industrial crop plantations such as rubber and banking belonged to the state. Peasants were organized into solidarity groups (krom samaki), comprising 10–20 families (Ledgerwood, 2003). Members of the group communally cultivated certain plots of land and shared the harvest based upon their contributions, with varying types of krom samaki reflecting the extent to which property and labour were collectivized. Yet as Frings (1994) highlights, in practice, many peasant communities reverted to individual farming practices, given the lack of state incentives or support for collective farming and productivity raising, and continued individual rights over farm tools and technologies. Land access, agricultural support and productivity were thus structurally uneven across the country.

In Svay Srok, each family member received roughly one-third of an acre of land as part of the collective land restructure from 1980 onwards, of varying quality and topography. Evidence from the broader set of interviews across the three case study villages indicates two general trends. Firstly, that higher-quality land—low-lying land where water run-off does not occur during rice production for example—was largely given to those households that were wealthier or had stronger connections to the ruling regime. As Diepart and Dupuis (2014) have argued, local elites in Cambodia play a crucial role in translating broader land governance systems into local contexts and, through this, in controlling how territory is carved across different social groups. Secondly, land size for many families, combined with poor quality, was not sufficient for even subsistence production. It is in this context that we go on to explore the contours of land, gender and autonomy in Svay Srok.
The role of land in ensuring independence and autonomy for rural communities remains a contested one. On the one hand, for Marx, processes of rural dispossession in the English countryside in the 16th and 17th centuries represented a type of double ‘freedom’ for peasant farmers (Marx, 1976). Farmers were ‘free’ from having to produce their own subsistence, they could choose waged labour as a means of purchasing provisions, and thus, they were liberated from feudal land relations. On the other hand, Marx also highlights how this freedom could perversely facilitate exploitation, whereby the removal of access to land in enabling poor populations to produce their own subsistence sets up the necessity for waged work, and the concurrent commodification of social life. Thus in creating and maintaining a surplus population—a population of waged workers that are in excess of the needs of capital—capital drives wages down and weakens labour’s bargaining power in the market (Marx, 1976). In this guise, land affords rural labour autonomy from real subsumption by capital, that is, the reorganization of production to facilitate accumulation (Banaji, 1977), but there remains a tension as to whether land access for the rural poor facilitates exploitation through formal subsumption.

This tension is reflected in literature exploring rural autonomy today. Prevalent accounts highlight how small-scale farmers continue to partially resist the encroaching forces of capital, largely in commodity markets, as well as with regard to land dispossession, inputs and labour markets, through collective projects oriented towards autonomy that afford farmers some power over their terms of market engagement. More materialist accounts highlight how collective projects reconfigure relations of production vis-à-vis capital, such that farmers look to take on increased subsistence production, foster alternative markets and diversify income streams as a means of constructing some level of rural autonomy through land access and representing a form of spatially delimited resistance against encroaching market forces (Schneider & Niederle, 2010; van den Berg et al., 2018). This extends to classes of labour. For Brown (2019, p. 450), the insistence on retaining rural land access and undertaking subsistence rice production among labourers in a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the Laos–Thai border speaks to workers’ agency in enacting a form of ‘fixity’, whereby to accrue more bargaining power in moving across different jobs and looking for better conditions, workers use subsistence production as a ‘safety net’. Beyond this, more constructivist accounts have highlighted links between land and identity, in addition to materialist factors. As Scott (1986) wrote of peasant producers in Malaysia, ‘the desire for autonomy, for control over the working day and the sense of freedom and self-respect such control provides, is a vastly underestimated social aspiration for much of the world’s population’ (p. 85). In this sense, a more subjective understanding of autonomy is emphasized. Similarly, Vergara-Camus’ (2009, 2014) exploration of the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil and the Zapatistas in Mexico speaks to political projects centred around a fundamental reconceptualization of land and people’s subject positions in relation to it. He argues that for the communities in question, ‘gaining and protecting access to land means gaining control over their labour and the autonomy of taking decisions on issues of agricultural production’ (Vergara-Camus, 2009, p. 383).

Yet across these varied accounts of rural autonomy vis-à-vis land, the issue of gender remains relatively peripheral. Specifically, the question of how different gendered subject positions reshape what constitutes rural autonomy and what goes into constructing rural autonomy remains largely unanswered, with a limited literature tackling this issue. In the 1980s and 1990s, following renewed attention to land reforms in the wake of neoliberal land restructuring across parts of the Global South, there was a call for women’s land rights among feminist voices, particularly among non-governmental organization (NGO) and grassroots organizations (Kandiyoti, 2002; Razavi, 2003). Agarwal (2003) echoed this approach, arguing that despite increased attention to jobs, working conditions and small-scale credit highlighted by fellow feminist scholars and groups, women’s land rights must remain a priority for development policy. This she suggested is due to women’s lower levels of absorption into non-farm work, the need to maintain greater control over income and resources stemming from land production and the political power that accrues for access to wider state benefits through landownership. Conversely, Jackson’s (2003) rebuttal of Agarwal highlights several key issues that are pertinent to our approach. Firstly, she suggests that ‘peasants’ constitute ‘an
implicitly male subject’, which do not integrate women’s distinctive role in production and reproduction, and/or acknowledge the male identity of the ‘peasant’, particularly with regard to sometimes-hegemonic masculinities that constitute such identities (p. 457). Jackson (2003, p. 462) argues against the perceived notion that ‘land rights will prove to be the single key that unlocks the subordination of women’, highlighting access to cash, labour constraints, gendered divisions of crop production and wider property rights as factors that differently shape women’s relationship to land.

Secondly, Jackson (2003) highlights the centrality of local context to understanding the extent to which women’s land rights may or may not facilitate empowerment, arguing for a greater focus on land relations as social relations. Her article asks: How does women’s relationship to land link to their subject position—in terms of productive and reproductive labour—within and beyond the agrarian household? Taken together, Jackson’s points highlight the need for greater context-specific research on how different gendered subjects reshape the use of land vis-à-vis struggles for autonomy and what this tells us about gendered processes of autonomy. In this paper then, we look to explore gender, autonomy and land in two key ways.

4.1 | Gendering autonomy

Firstly, in exploring autonomy, we draw on feminist literature to think about women’s particular subject positions in small farming households in Cambodia. Feminist work has highlighted the gendered burden of both productive and crucially reproductive work—that is, material, biological and care-based labour required to reproduce households day to day—which continues to primarily fall to women (Bakker, 2007; Federici, 2004; Mies, 1986). This labour of social reproduction contributes to producing the worker (Bhattacharya, 2017), to the creation of value under capitalism (Mezzadri, 2019) and also to the survival of rural households, the ‘sustenance of life’, which falls outside the concerns of value creation under capitalism (Ossome & Naidu, 2021, p. 19). For Osomme and Naidu, this latter point is crucial, as it highlights the need to understand how gendered labours of survival are determined not through the imperative of value creation, but rather through a logic that falls outside the realms of capital accumulation. In a similar vein, we suggest here that everyday autonomy vis-à-vis land needs to be understood outside the broader focus on larger political projects and instead through a focus on survival. As Brickell (2020) has argued, in Cambodia, gendered ‘survival work’ among the country’s majority-informal population that makes up over 90% of the country’s workforce (ILO, 2016) constitutes both the invisible and unwaged labour required to reproduce households and can include facing (interconnected) gendered harms in the form of domestic violence and forced eviction. The intertwining of a deeply patriarchal society with the forms of dispossession engendered through state-led neoliberal accumulation in the country today speak to a ‘crisis-ordinary’ (Brickell, 2020)—that is, when the ordinary becomes a space of perpetual crises, rendering such crises an everyday phenomenon and making survival in the face of this feel like an ‘accomplishment’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). In this context, autonomy is something more fundamental—it is the ability to survive day to day, to continue to exist and to go on doing so in a context of ongoing and multiple oppressions.

We take inspiration here from Katz’s (2004, pp. 242–243) recasting of ‘resistance’, whereby she differentiates between ‘resistance’ (oppositional consciousness that achieves transformative change), ‘reworking’ (altering the organization but not the polarization of power relations) and ‘resilience’ (allowing people to survive but with limited change in circumstances) as a means of opening up what is meant by ‘autonomy’. Katz’s approach draws attention to lesser forms of oppositional agency with regard to resistance, and we take a similar approach in relation to autonomy. The incremental nature of autonomy is thus revealed through a focus on everyday survival work, rather than a focus on ‘more grandiose or visible gestures alone’ (Katz, 2004, p. 242). For example, Bastia’s (2013, p. 170) writing on the experiences of Bolivian women’s transnational migration is exemplary of how high levels of autonomy associated with their mobility were not their objective per se, but a ‘means to an end, aimed towards material achievements and upward social mobility’ for their family. She explains further,
women generally use the family and the welfare of their children as the primary justification for their own freedom of movement, indicating that women's migration decision-making is often autonomous but nevertheless embedded within moral obligations towards their children and other family members" (p. 173). Decisions and acts that constitute survival work need to be re-envisioned therefore as providing the ‘groundwork for stronger responses’ (Katz, 2004, p. 242).

4.2 | Autonomy within the market?

Secondly, through an interrogation of everyday acts of survival, we explore forms of autonomy within the market and also the limits to such approaches. Despite the long-held association between land and autonomy, wider interrogation into rural women’s experiences and aspirations reveal that for some, farming and concurrently land access are no longer a primary aim. Their views and goals have been reshaped by the eroding of welfare and social support mechanisms under neoliberal reforms from the 1980s onwards and the increased stress this has placed on women’s reproductive labours (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2017; Pattnaik & Lahiri-Dutt, 2021).

This picture of rural distress and gendered experiences therefore requires a rethink of how entry into and relations within markets, on terms that are controlled to some extent by rural small farmers themselves, may constitute forms of autonomy. It requires acknowledging that many small-scale rural producers across the Global South today have been reliant upon markets to some extent for their reproduction—as labourers, commodity producers and/or debtors—for decades, even centuries (Bernstein, 2006). As a result, the notion of the autonomous ‘peasant’ represents something of an anachronism in contemporary rural life. We therefore focus on the extent and terms of market engagement and how autonomy and resistance are achieved through altering these terms. Henderson’s (2019) work on small-scale coffee producers in Mexico argues that ‘the desire to retain and expand control over household labour and decisions regarding production is at the core of small coffee producers’ struggles for autonomy from and within the market’ (p. 402). Expanding this through a gendered lens, we focus on how entry into markets constitutes a form of survival work.

However we remain wary of suggesting that market engagement can necessarily constitute a successful path to autonomy, particularly given the focus on microfinance in this paper, and the decades-long, gendered push towards microfinance as a form of poverty alleviation, which is so prevalent in mainstream development thinking. World-over, women are seen to be more secure debtors for microfinance schemes; investing in them is thus considered ‘smart economics’ as they ‘contribute more effectively to their societies by reinvesting earnings in health, education, and family’ (IFC, n.d.). Yet as Mader (2014) suggests, access to new forms of credit for the precarious working poor constitutes a means for finance capital to commodify their future labour power. Accounts highlight how the ceaseless demands of microfinance repayments often deepen livelihood insecurity, given the discrepancy between irregularity of income and demands for regular repayments. This can lead debtors to feel they are losing control over their lives (Saiag, 2020). Ensuing insecurity has a gendered inflection as Paprocki (2016) identifies: ‘with the proliferation of microcredit lending, women’s responsibilities for household labor persist and remain invisible, while their gendered role as microcredit borrowers becomes the basis of their further social and economic dispossession’ (p. 33). However, research has also highlighted that given the wider constraints placed upon social reproduction in rural life, credit can act as a form of protection, and even aspiration, enabling people to fulfil material desires (Guérin et al., 2012) and fund migration (Lainez, 2020). Here then, a focus on survival through debt, often through the sale of land, offers a vantage point from which to unpack either wholly dismissive or laudatory accounts of small-scale credit as a form of poverty alleviation. Instead, we examine how in instances of deep market penetration, debt-taking and collateralized land contribute to the everyday survival of rural households, how this may reshape social relations in positive ways and what limits exist to this as a form of longer-term autonomy.
LAND AND AUTONOMY IN CAMBODIA: A PREFACE AND THREE WOMEN'S STORIES

The Cambodian rural poor today face multiple overlapping barriers to agricultural production. Over 30 years after the country was plunged into economic liberalization, and now overseen by an authoritarian regime under the rule of Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (Hughes, 2003), rural regions have seen deepening processes of dispossession, whereas sectors of growth have not absorbed near-requisite levels of labour. Dispossession is driven by multiple factors. A land titling programme introduced from the late 1980s onwards (Dwyer, 2015) encroached on private and communal lands, disrupting spaces for foraging and fishing. Additionally, the rapid introduction of agricultural intensification led to increased mechanization and new planting techniques designed to lower labour requirements, thus placing pressure on the reproductive strategies of rural working households reliant on agricultural work (Parsons, 2017). Eviction in rural areas is also a significant issue (Lamb et al., 2017; Park, 2019). Furthermore, increasingly erratic rainfall patterns resulting from the impacts of climate change (Thoeun, 2015) have rendered agricultural investments and cultivation more insecure, as increased incidents of floods and droughts lead to degraded crop quality or even crop failure (Parsons, 2017).

As such, hundreds of thousands of rural households reproduce themselves through translocal patterns of work (Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2020), with precarious labour (migration), subsistence cultivation, foraging, petty trading and agricultural labour combining to constitute an insecure livelihood strategy (Diepart et al., 2019; Green & Estes, 2019). In this context, the utility of land is inextricably intertwined with access to requisite productive assets to enable even subsistence cultivation. Yet since the onset of liberalization, the Cambodian government has offered scant support for agricultural production (ADB, 2014). Furthermore, what programmes there are, largely funded through NGOs and targeted towards rural development are centred on commercialising agriculture, with a focus on productivity raising technologies, often under the aegis of ‘climate resilience’ (see, e.g. UNDP, 2013). As Cousins and Scoones (2010) have argued in the case of Southern Africa, the predominance of neoclassical approaches to land distribution, with their emphasis on raising productivity and efficiency through industrializing farming, has obscured the heterogeneous livelihood strategies that exist vis-à-vis land and failed to offer support for smallholder livelihoods. The general lack of state support for agriculture in the Cambodian context therefore leads to what Vijayabaskar and Menon (2018, 572) have termed ‘dispossession by neglect’, referring to a privileging of ‘non-agricultural livelihoods’ and concurrent lack of ‘attention to infrastructure supporting agricultural growth and adequate returns’. This form of dispossession combines with that of the more well-known accumulation by dispossession in Cambodia (Schoenberger, 2017) to lead to instances of both appropriation and land sale.

This context has profound impacts on rural life in the village and the experiences of the three working women in Svay Srok: Kalliyan, Chamreoun and Mony. Today, as stated previously, these women are among the millions of ‘classes of labour’ that dominate rural class relations in Cambodia; they are compelled to reproduce themselves through fragmented forms of waged work and scant subsistence production where possible (Bernstein, 2006).

For Devi and his wife Kalliyan, the land they were given after 1979 was insufficient to feed their family of three. As a result, Devi, like many other men of his generation, joined the PRK army in the early 1980s, compelled into gruelling work at the frontline of a long battle on the Thai–Cambodia border to oust the fledgling opposition (Hughes, 2003). Kalliyan was left to look after their family and make ends meet whilst Devi was away, his remittances offering a crucial, yet still unstable, form of support. She recounts her limited choices that led to the sale of their agricultural land. ‘I sold all our land because my children were sick and my husband was away with the army, meanwhile I couldn’t find any money. So I sold the land … When my husband went to work as soldier, I did not have money to support my family, so I sold it’. Kalliyan’s account centralizes her role in undertaking survival work—care provisioning for her children. In this light, and in the broader context of inadequate land size, state support and poor quality land, her decision to sell what little land the family has speaks to the inefficacy of land in this instance to facilitate even the daily reproductive demands of her household.

For Chamreoun too, the provision of land access through the krom samaki system in the early 1980s was not sufficient to meet her needs. She was 8 months' pregnant in 1986, with another small child at home, when her
husband passed away, leaving her a widow with insufficient land, labour and capital to feed her family. As such, Chamreoun too sold her land soon afterwards, stating simply that she did so to ‘support her children’. Mony offers a similar narrative, having sold her family’s land in the mid-1980s. She suggests, ‘When I had children, farming became less productive, and so I sold my farming land to support my family’, highlighting the burden of care work and how this affected time on her farm. Mony suggests that even prior to this, the land did not always provide sufficient rice for her family, ‘sometimes it was enough and sometimes I bought rice from others’.

Mony and Chamreoun, like Kalliyan, narrate their decision to sell land as an immediate strategy to address a crisis of survival in Cambodia. The choices are linked to children’s proximate care needs in each instance, which constitute the gendered labours of social reproduction that are central to how these women understand the salience of land. Furthermore, in the broader context outlined, subsistence farming constitutes a mainstay and is rendered difficult for these women due to inadequate land, poor quality land, a lack of state support and/or the vagaries of rain-fed farming. As such, land sales constituted a crucial reproductive strategy, a form of gendered survival work. This interpretation does not preclude the possibility of land sales by men; certainly, poverty alleviation is an immediate concern here, and one shared by different gendered subjects in precarious households. However in focusing on why women sold land, we highlight how distress land sales are also a purposeful act of everyday survival, which is arguably less visible in predominant accounts of how autonomy vis-à-vis land is constructed.

5.1 Land and changing environmental context

Today, the links between land, survival, gender and autonomy have been reshaped by debt as a key path for reproduction and even aspiration in rural Cambodia and the threats to subsistence cultivation brought on by environmental change and political economy. In unpacking this in relation to autonomy, we look to the shifting role of debt, survival strategies and through this land, in the stories of Kalliyan, Mony and Chamreoun.

Despite the seemingly limited role of land vis-à-vis subsistence provisioning, all three women indicated that they would like to have farmland, and for Chamreoun, this includes attempts to sharecrop other people’s land in the past two decades. This is of particular concern given the rising costs of food in Cambodia, and the poor quality of vegetables women can access in local markets, part of undertaking nutrition provisioning for the household. As Chamreoun tells us, ‘the vegetables we grow ourselves taste good … if people grow them for their own consumption they don’t use chemicals, but if they grow them for sale at the market they use chemicals because they want high yields’. Furthermore, in understanding the utility of land for subsistence cultivation in the current era, the impacts of climate and environmental change and how they are reproduced through relations of political economy are central. Cambodia and neighbouring Vietnam and Laos, which together make up the Lower Mekong Basin, ‘are among the most vulnerable in the world with respect to climate change’ (Thoeun, 2015, p. 62). Cambodia in particular has seen its historical rainfall pattern of double wet season and dry season rainfall to become more erratic and move increasingly towards a single period of increased and more extreme rainfall (Thoeun, 2015). This means that rain-fed farmers must contend with a shorter and more intense period of rainfall, drastically altering cropping patterns and increasing the risks of floods, pests, droughts and other linked issues.

For Kalliyan, Chamreoun and Mony, the ability to farm subsistence rice would offer some insulation from the need for wages and thus limited autonomy. Kalliyan is clear on this fact, stating that her family’s need to migrate for work is because they ‘did not have a rice field like others’, having sold it for immediate reproductive needs. Chamreoun has made several attempts to sharecrop since selling her own land, but has never been successful in cultivating enough to warrant her investments and labour. She cites inadequate water access as a key issue in her failed attempts, stating ‘I spent all the money on a water pump, I lost out on labour opportunities for nothing’. Chamreoun paid approximately US $100 per year for accessing a neighbouring farmer’s water pump but found that this expenditure left her unable to even produce sufficient subsistence rice to cover her costs. For Mony, the vagaries of rainfall were a key driver in her original decision to sell her farmland. She states, ‘We depended only on rainfall. If there was
a canal it had dried up—we could only farm in the rainy season ... now there is less rain, and so rice dries in the field and yields drop. If we had a pumping machine, we could pump water into the field, but unfortunately we don't have one, so I don't have water'.

To ameliorate the impacts of increasing insecurities in rainfall, farmers are looking towards irrigation technology as a means of accessing groundwater in particular. Here, class relations play a role in determining who has access to such technologies and who does not, as classes of labour are forced to pay for pump access from those able to purchase them. Furthermore, access to such pumps, and through this access to groundwater, is enabled only through entering credit markets, largely microfinance, on adverse terms as explained further below. State support for private irrigation systems is non-existent, and long-term infrastructural investments in canals has long dried up around Svay Srok, despite its close proximity to the Mekong River. As a consequence, subsistence rice production risks entangling women more deeply into the same credit markets that it potentially offers autonomy from.

Subsistence cultivation, and through this a form of limited land-based autonomy, is thus constrained in part by the climate, or more accurately, the inadequate support available in ameliorating the effects of the changing climate for classes of labour. Mony lamentably compares her plight to that of fellow elite villagers, saying ‘For those who have large tracts of land, they cultivate many crops like corn, mango, bean, they don’t only grow rice. Unlike me …’. This means the utility of land in affording women with a means of survival through subsistence cultivation is limited, though it remains an aspiration for all of them, given the insulation it could offer vis-à-vis reliance on wages and credit. Women look, therefore, to new ways to make land work for their survival.

5.2 | Land and debt in neoliberal Cambodia

For Kalliyan, the equity released through her agricultural land sale in the mid-1980s did not prove sufficient in the longer term to address the rising reproductive needs of her family. Kalliyan eventually gave birth to eight children, and her husband returned only sporadically from his work in the army. After a bout of illness among her children, Kalliyan began to borrow from her neighbours: ‘we went to borrow money to take the children to hospital. I was not earning, and so I became very indebted to fellow villagers because the interest was high’.

With scant opportunities for wage labour in the village, and rising high-interest informal debts to wealthier villagers, Kalliyan moved to work in a brick kiln in a nearby province. She took her children, and her husband joined whenever he returned from the army. She recounts: ‘We did not have a rice field like others then so we had to migrate to work ... I was poor and so I had to work for this job. My children were always sick and so I had to bring my family to work here ... from 1984 or 1985 until the present-day I have worked for the brick kiln, I have only had a month’s rest’. Kalliyan began to borrow from the kiln owner to pay back her debts to fellow villagers, transforming her wage relation into a debt bond. She then moved to borrowing from microfinance institutions from the 1990s (referred to as ‘banks’). She suggests: ‘I preferred to borrow from the bank to pay off the villagers’ debt, and I liked paying back to the bank monthly’. Today, she owes US $3000 in outstanding loans, where gross national income per capita in Cambodia in 2019 was US $1530 (World Bank, 2019b).

Kalliyan’s story speaks to the centrality of credit as a social reproductive strategy, a form of survival work, first through informal channels, then a debt bond, and now also through microfinance institutions. The microcredit sector in Cambodia has risen from covering an estimated 300,000 borrowers in 2005 (Bateman, 2017) to 2.6 million in 2020 (Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions et al., 2020). In Svay Srok, villagers report microfinance institutions starting to appear in their local town around a decade ago, with multiple microfinance companies setting up large, multi-story offices in what are low-level towns across the country and jostling for space as they compete against one another. Villagers report that loan officers, largely local recruits, regularly visit their houses to offer new loans or check on existing ones and collude with village-level officials to gain insight into different villagers’ financial status. Microfinance penetration in rural Cambodia is especially aggressive in seeking out new consumers from among the rural poor.
The use of multiple microfinance loans combined with informal debts (Bylander, 2015) and even in some cases debt bonds (Natarajan et al., 2020) offers a key means of coping for precarious rural households. In keeping with trends across the Global South (Roy, 2010), the last two decades have seen commercialization and deregulation in the Cambodian microfinance sector, with a shift from non-collateralized group loans to individual loans requiring collateral (Clark, 2006). This coincided with the land titling programme across the country, started by the PRK in the late 1980s (Frings, 1994), and propelled forwards by the World Bank under the aegis of current-day Prime Minister Hun Sen from the late 1990s onwards (Dwyer, 2015). Land titling had a key effect in driving microfinance forwards (Ovesen & Trankell, 2014). As Green (2019) has argued, the process of deciding what constitutes sufficient collateral in terms of land sees loan officers ‘re-constituting land through new grids of evaluation’ (p. 759). This means homestead land as well as agricultural land is valued.

Yet beyond survival work, collateralized land also forms the basis for aspiration towards autonomy. For Kalliyan, accessing a loan of US $1500 (US $2000 with interest) through PRASAC, one of the largest microfinance loan providers in Cambodia, meant (temporarily) giving up the land title to her home at the time. In Svay Srok, whereas 39% of those surveyed where indebted, only 25% of these had agricultural land, speaking to the centrality of homestead land titles in facilitating debt-taking. For Kalliyan, land—in this instance her homestead land—has taken on a new resonance in enabling her to access forms of credit that are otherwise unavailable to her. She is clear that she approached PRASAC to ask for a loan and chose to put up her house as collateral, stating ‘they were friendly—nobody forced us’. Relatedly, as Guérin and Venkatasubramanian (2020), market debts may act as a form of emancipation when understood within the broader context of the protection, uncertainty and tendencies workers face in other (market) relations. For Kalliyan, access to immediate liquidity offers some ease from the pressures and concerns she holds in undertaking social reproduction. The use of homestead land for collateral is thus momentarily emancipatory, and even enables some breathing space towards planning, as Kalliyan states she would like to start a small business selling vegetables in the long term.

Yet the imposition of a debt bond on Kalliyan and her family has resulted in unfree labour relations stretching across generations and has therefore had a profound effect on Kalliyan’s role in homemaking. Kalliyan, her husband and four of her children continue to work at the brick kiln to pay off their debt bond to the owner, which shows little sign of decreasing, and to pay off their microfinance loans. Debt bondage on Cambodian brick kilns is often inter-generational, as work is structured in a manner to render bond repayment difficult (Brickell et al., 2018). Kalliyan tells us, ‘Now I am old. I hope my children will work and pay off the debt [to the kiln owner], it doesn’t matter how many years it takes. If they cannot pay off, I don’t know what they’ll do’. The immediate respite enabled by debt therefore relies on the pledging of her children’s future labour. The seeming step towards autonomy in the present binds the future.

The intergenerational seeping of debt and debt bondage is highlighted only by Kalliyan, not her husband, and at several points in the interview, evidencing the gendered ‘emotional harm’ (Rai et al., 2014, p. 92) associated with social reproduction and the care work intrinsic to it. For now, Kalliyan no longer has her own home; she lives between the village in one of her children’s houses and the brick kiln with her husband Devi, who admits, it feels like ‘all of my life I have not had a house of my own’. To repay earlier debts, Devi and Kalliyan sold their home and homestead land and have lived between the brick kiln and their children’s land ever since. Kalliyan is clear that the impact of debt in separating her family is a harsh one: ‘I want to come back and for us to stay altogether, but it is difficult—if I come back here [to the village] there is no work’. This lack of permanent abode has even caused Kalliyan problems in registering for an ID poor card, which is crucial in enabling her to access free medical services, thus driving the costs of social reproduction up. As she explains, ‘Nobody makes a card for us because we have left the homeland, we stay on the brick kiln, moving from one kiln to another’.

Land is thus tied to the survival strategies afforded by credit in current-day Cambodia, where the structural precarity inherent in the lives of many rural Cambodians sees access to liquidity through land titles, however predatory, as a temporary lifeline, a means of surviving and thus beginning to eke out a more autonomous existence. The encroaching on homestead land as a form of collateral, as opposed to agricultural land alone, represents a particular
threat to survival however, as the threat of taking away one's home away looms large, and even compels women and their families into debt bondage as a means of paying off MFI loans and staving off creditors.

Chamreoun's husband and two of her children work in brick kilns as debt-bonded workers. The debt bond of over US $1000 for her husband remains stubbornly high, because as Chamreoun states, 'the money we earn is just enough for paying the bank'. The piece-rate wages brought home from the brick kiln therefore contribute to the two MFI loans that Chamreoun holds, together constituting US $3000 and taken for health issues with her husband. She says: 'my husband was sick, he got liver disease. I borrowed money to send him to a few hospitals but he didn't get better. At last I sent him to a Soviet Hospital in Phnom Penh ... he had this disease when he came to work in the brick kiln. When he worked, he felt pain in his back and he was told that he had liver disease when he went to the hospital'. Chamreoun is clear that she made the decision to take on MFI loans, and this is directly linked to her reproductive work in caring for her husband. In this instance, loans are linked to survival in the most immediate sense, as health issues that are shown to be endemic to kiln work in Cambodia (see Brickell et al., 2018) drive her to raise funds for her husband's health costs. This is in a context of inadequate public health coverage in the country, leading the poor to routinely undertake 'catastrophic spending' to cover costs (Dalal et al., 2017, p. 3).

Chamreoun now stays at home to look after 10 of her grandchildren whilst her children engage in various forms of labour migration, including two who work in brick kilns. Despite his health issues, her husband also continues to work in a brick kiln to pay off her MFI monthly instalments. Her life is 'hard', she is in charge of 10 grandchildren, running the household where her husband, 11 children and some of their spouses come and go in different parts of the year, and she oversees household budgeting. Yet she states, 'I do nothing, I just take care of the grandchildren'. In this instance, the reprieve brought about by loans taken in exchange for homestead land titles is enough to ensure her husband eventually accessed appropriate medical care, but leaves her family bonded to kiln owners, and sees her take on significant levels of reproductive care in her ageing years.

The financialization of land therefore offers a limited and temporary form of reworking one's oppressive circumstances vis-à-vis survival work. Withstanding this observation, it must also be recognized as part of the variegated strategies of everyday autonomy given the constrained context in which Chamreoun and Kalliyan reproduce their households. The ability to make land work in new ways offers a key lifeline for both and in a few cases enabled other households that relied on remittances from younger generations to eventually escape debt and move towards increased autonomy, even becoming upwardly mobile. The taking of debt therefore constitutes both a form of immediate survival work and a constrained choice for these women in striving towards a more autonomous life. Yet for the majority, an unyielding debt repayment schedule combined with high interest rates and high debt levels renders this a new form of oppression, and sometimes an intergenerational one.

6 | CONCLUSION

The links between land and autonomy are continually being (re)shaped in Cambodia. New processes of development at a macro level, shifts in political economy and social relations of production and the changing climate all serve to render the salience of land to both 'life's work' of social reproduction (Katz, 2004) and to autonomy an evolving phenomenon. Having explored the trajectories of three rural working women in the village of Svay Srok, this article makes two broad contributions.

Firstly, we draw on feminist scholarship to reframe rural autonomy as an everyday, incremental process of resistance. In taking inspiration from Katz's (2004) variegated understanding of resilience, reworking and resistance, we draw attention to how different and sometimes seemingly contradictory uses of land by women can constitute a form of everyday autonomy, when viewed in light of the survival work they undertake, and which frames and compels their decision-making. Women in Svay Srok choose to sell and/or mortgage land for numerous reasons and very often to entangle them deeper into credit markets. Literature focusing on projects of long-term, collective or structural autonomy may not view such everyday acts of survival as oppositional practice, yet in a context where
surviving each day is understood as an ‘accomplishment’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 11), we argue for greater attention to these decisions and how they offer forms of reprieve and even emancipation in a longer, gruelling process of gendered survival work, which ultimately contributes to larger projects of autonomy.

Secondly, we suggest that in some cases, market integration can be understood as part of a drive towards increased autonomy. Women in Svay Srok faced with tight labour markets, a squeeze on subsistence cultivation and scant state support choose to mortgage lands for access to microcredit schemes to offer immediate relief for the family. Here, their everyday survival constitutes a form of autonomy, of being able to live day to day in the face of multiple oppressions, and the decision to find oppositional practice through the market must be understood as such. Yet we remain ambivalent about the longer-term emancipatory potential of debt for these women. The rigid conditions of microfinance repayments lead in some instances to women swapping debts for debt bonds, and entering into long term, and even intergenerational unfree labour relations, which usher in new forms of exploitation. Despite this, those in debt bonds and facing high microfinance loans continue to survive, finding new ways to rework temporarily oppressive circumstances to reproduce the household day to day. The logics and approaches of this are rooted in the gendered subject and the requirements and constraints of survival work in a particular context.

We ultimately argue for greater attention to survival work and incremental processes that constitute it in thinking about rural autonomy more broadly. Any project of rural autonomy relies on vast amounts of invisible survival work that goes into simply allowing precarious rural households to exist from day to day (Ossome & Naidu, 2021). Focusing on the gendered labours that constitute this allows us to reveal a rich subterranean set of practices that go into enabling precarious households to eventually build towards resistance movements and projects of autonomy and also to highlight their limits and constraints.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in ESRC ReShare at https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/.

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