

LAND TENURE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



Land is the most critical economic resource for the vast majority of the rural poor who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. In particular, women's land rights are fundamental to rural development outcomes, as women's ownership and control over land can affect what households produce and how the proceeds from agricultural production are allocated within the family.¹

Yet, throughout much of the developing world women have less access, control, and ownership of this key asset, and their land rights are less secure. This often limits women's economic opportunities and leaves them more vulnerable to poverty, hunger, gender-based violence² and displacement. Efforts to formalize and strengthen women's land tenure and property rights are narrowing these gaps, leading to positive change in women's empowerment, food security and family nutrition, livelihoods, economic growth, and broader rural and urban development. A sample of evidence is highlighted below.

FEWER RIGHTS, LESS LAND: Women play critical roles in food production in the developing world, and are also often responsible for producing for their own families' consumption. But women are less likely to own or control land than men. Although there is currently limited rigorous data on gendered land ownership, the best available data shows large differences between women's participation in agricultural production and their ownership of agricultural land:

- In sub-Saharan Africa, women comprise 48.7 percent of agricultural labor, but only 15 percent of agricultural land holders.
- In Asia (excluding Japan), women comprise 42 percent of agricultural labor and 11 percent of land holders.³
- In Latin America, women comprise 20 percent of agricultural labor and 18 percent of landowners.
- In the Middle East and North Africa, women comprise 40 percent of agricultural labor and 5 percent of landowners.⁴

Even when women do own or control land, the quality is often lower and the amount less than that owned or controlled by men.⁵ In addition, women frequently own fewer assets; in fact, women's assets are seldom worth even half the value of men's assets.⁶ A study in Ethiopia found the average land area women control is 43 percent smaller than that controlled by male farmers.⁷ Other research in the Tigray Region found that plots owned by female-headed households were 23 percent smaller those owned by men.⁸

Limitations on women's access to and use of land restricts economic gains. For example, evidence from Ethiopia has found that female-headed households received 10 percent fewer visits from agricultural extension agents and 12 percent fewer visits by development agents than male-headed households.⁹ Moreover, plots farmed by women often have lower agricultural productivity than those farmed by men.¹⁰ In addition, women may not have equal access to land and rental markets. Additional research found that Ethiopian men rented out four times as much land as women and thus were more likely to realize greater income benefits from land.¹¹ Finally, social norms and gender-based preferences may constrain women's ability to access and use needed agricultural inputs.¹²

WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS, EMPOWERMENT, AND ECONOMIC GAINS: When women have secure rights to land, they make investments to improve land and acquire better quality inputs, participate in land rental markets, and receive more income.

- When women have secure land rights, they have higher economic gains. In Tanzania, women with strong land rights were 3 times more likely to work off-farm, earned up to 3.8 times more income,

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and were 1.35 times more likely to have individual savings.¹³ In India, gender-sensitive allocation of micro-gardens increased women's use of credit.¹⁴ In Rwanda, women having land titles was correlated with a 12 percent increase in women taking out loans.¹⁵ In India, more secure land rights led to an 11 percent increase in women deciding whether to sell crops produced on such land.¹⁶

- When women have secure land rights, women's empowerment increases.¹⁷ Secure access to land acts as a source of empowerment by increasing women's economic security and increasing their control over household decisions. For example, in Nepal, 37 percent of women who owned land had the final say on a household decision, compared to 20 percent of women who did not own land.¹⁸ In Ethiopia, a household land certification program led to a 44 percent increase in the likelihood of a wife deciding which crops to grow on lands under her control.¹⁹

WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY: When women have secure land rights, land is used more efficiently, and agricultural investment and production increase.²⁰ In Rwanda, women with formalized land rights were 19 percent more likely to engage in soil conservation, compared to 10 percent among men. In rural Benin, women were historically less likely than men to invest in soil fertility by leaving their land fallow, but this gender gap disappeared in communities where female-headed households mapped and documented their parcel boundaries. In these communities, female-headed households were just as likely as male-headed households to leave their land fallow.²¹

WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY AND BENEFIT THE ENTIRE HOUSEHOLD: Closing the gender gap in secure access to land is fundamental not only for women's empowerment, but also for broader family food security, children's health and economic gains.

- When women have secure access to land, productivity gains lead to broader household benefits.²² Research shows that if women had the same access to resources for agricultural production as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent—a substantial increase at national scales—and in turn reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12 to 17 percent.²³

- When women have secure access to land, nutrition outcomes improve. In Ethiopia, an increase in land allocated to women decreased household food insecurity by 36 percent.²⁴ Studies from Nicaragua and Honduras have found that increases in female landholdings are associated with increases in household food expenditure and child educational attainment.²⁵ In Vietnam, children in households where women own land are up to 10 percent less likely to be sick.²⁶ In Nepal, in households where women own land, children are 33 percent less likely to be severely underweight.²⁷

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS: Successful practices and programming have been developed to facilitate gender-equitable property rights in many parts of the world. These methods provide valuable examples of how the complex issue of women's rights to access and own land can be addressed in different contexts. Strategies include:

- Ensuring that women have legal rights to own, inherit and transfer land;
- Supporting efforts to help women exercise their legal rights, for example, through support to legal aid clinics;
- Educating local land administration officials on women's land rights and how to promote and enforce these rights;
- Enhancing women's decision-making capabilities on land they use, regardless of whether they are a named owner of the land or if their names appear on legal documents;
- Giving attention to individual rights within a household, not just household rights as a whole;
- Addressing norms and customs for how women acquire land (e.g., purchase, inheritance), the quality of land they receive, and how land is transferred at marriage or a spouse's death;
- Addressing social norms that support violence against women in order to mitigate harmful behavior;
- Undertaking land governance reforms, including legal reforms in linked sectors to harmonize family, marriage, and inheritance laws and both the national and local levels;
- Expanding legal protections for women's rights to land, and protection from gender-based discrimination in customary and statutory land systems;
- Working with customary leaders and systems to promote women's access to and control over land; and,
- Educating both women and men on the benefits of recognizing women's land rights.

USAID WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS PROGRAMMING: PAST AND PRESENT: USAID considers strengthening women's land rights central to its efforts to eliminate extreme poverty and promote resilient, democratic societies. Therefore, the U.S. Government and USAID have played a leading role in several high profile actions in support of women's land rights:

- The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the U.S. Government and USAID helped shape as part of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), contain targets where women's land and property rights are important to ending poverty (target 1.4), achieving food security (target 2.3), and ensuring gender equality (target 5.a) by 2030.²⁸
- USAID's Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy of 2012, places a centralized role on incorporating women's empowerment in all of our programming in order to realize our collective international priorities.

- The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT)—a globally agreed international instrument for responsible land governance—prioritize strengthening women's land rights. USAID chaired the negotiations in 2012 and is leading implementation of the Guidelines.²⁹

USAID also supports coordinated policies and programs that clarify and strengthen women's land rights. USAID is working through multiple channels to address the complex set of issues around women's land rights in 17 countries. For example:

- In Tanzania, women's land certification jumped from 0 to 49.4 percent in the villages where USAID's Mobile Application to Secure Tenure (MAST) was deployed.
- In Tajikistan, a Feed the Future project is supporting land policy reforms and legal aid clinics that focus on strengthening women's property rights and restructuring farms to develop a robust market in land use rights.
- In Kosovo, USAID is supporting judicial and policy reforms that strengthen women's property rights—including inheritance rights—and is supporting public information and awareness campaigns and legal aid programs to help women understand and exercise their rights.

As a result of these programs and others, since 2013, more than 140,000 households have received formal documentation of their land rights, more than 87,000 people have been trained on land tenure, and 18 laws or policies have been adopted that strengthen land rights – potentially benefiting 182 million people.

For more information, visit: www.land-links.org/issue/gender-equality/

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