

## 2015 Global Landscapes Forum



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# This Land is Our Land: Gender Perspectives on Tenure and Rights

## A thematic high-level dialogue at the 2015 Global Landscapes Forum (GLF)

Large-scale initiatives to restore degraded land across the developing world are quickly building momentum in the expectation that they will deliver major economic, environmental, and social returns, while helping cope with climate change. To meet such high expectations, these initiatives must address early on the challenge of achieving gender equity in land ownership. This dialogue brings the challenge into sharp focus and outlines key steps that, according to recent research, can contribute effectively to gender-sensitive land restoration.

Land degradation in the developing world contributes massively to global greenhouse gas emissions. Since large-scale restoration of degraded land is the least expensive option for contributing to climate stabilization, active pursuit of this option is an urgent global imperative. Together with sustainable land use, land restoration is also essential for increasing agricultural production to feed a rapidly growing global population and help overcome rural poverty.

### Toward gender equity in land ownership

Secure land tenure is vital for giving rural people tangible incentives to invest in land restoration and for ensuring they have the necessary resources to succeed. Recent work on land allocation and titling in India, for example, shows a significant link at

the household level between more food-secure livelihoods and access to land, including women's land ownership (Santos et al. 2014).

Land restoration initiatives are less likely to succeed, however, and might even backfire, unless they are guided by well-informed gender perspectives. Much research conducted in recent years has shown that achieving secure land tenure at the level of rural households is not enough. A wealth of evidence is available now showing that men and women do not have the same preferences for land use and restoration, or the same resources available to invest in the land.

Continuing to ignore these differences would seem to be a sure formula for failure. Yet, across the developing world, women are specifically and consistently denied secure land tenure. Reversing women's exclusion is thus a key requirement for

## Key messages

New landscape initiatives should consider the following key messages from recent research on gender perspectives in land tenure:

- Securing women's land tenure is important for sustainable land use and restoration.
- Many exaggerated claims about women's lack of land ownership detract attention from key issues regarding women's rights and land tenure.
- Women's land rights must be supported by revised legal frameworks.
- Policy reform must go hand-in-hand with efforts to increase women's awareness of their land rights and ability to take advantage of them.
- Joint ownership of land offers a promising alternative to the "zero sum game" of men's versus women's land rights.

enabling rural families to restore degraded land and reap their fair share of the benefits.

But changing current patterns of gender inequity is not easy. There are strong vested interests in maintaining the norms that reinforce inequity in land tenure. Even where policy reforms open the door for change, it remains a challenge to ensure that rural women can actually avail themselves of their rights.

## What must we do?

An important first step is to achieve clarity about the facts concerning women's lack of land ownership. Many of the exaggerated statistics that have been cited in recent years have little or no basis in social science. A glaring example is the oft-cited claim that women produce 70-80% of the world's food but own only 1% of the world's land.

Yet, because such "zombie" statistics have been so widely cited, they have proved remarkably persistent and have come to detract attention from the more important issues regarding women's land tenure (Doss et al. 2015). This is why CGIAR research has given much emphasis in recent years to collecting data that accurately reflect women's real predicament at the national level.

What does this research suggest must be done to create equitable tenure security?

To begin with, legislation and policies are needed to strengthen women's rights to

own and inherit land. Such initiatives may focus on expanding women's ownership of land as individuals or securing their rights to joint property ownership with their husbands, families, or communities. Women's rights to land have to be supported by legal frameworks that protect women's property rights in marriage and in case marriage ends in widowhood or divorce.

## Minding the gaps

Policy reforms are not enough, however, to achieve gender equality in land ownership. The government of Ethiopia, for example, began with a reform in the Family Law that gave equal rights to men and women within marriage and also in marital dissolution. This was then followed by gender-sensitive reforms on land rights, implemented about a decade ago. But it soon became apparent that there were significant gender gaps in knowledge about the reforms, and this limited women's adoption of soil conservation practices and the planting of trees (Quisumbing and Kumar 2014).

Related research in Ethiopia showed that new reforms on land rights reinforced the family law reform, building support for equal division of land and livestock in case of divorce. But again, women were less likely than men to know about the land registration process.

So, policy reform must go hand-in-hand with efforts to increase women's

awareness of their land rights and their ability to take advantage of them. Such efforts must offer equitable access to information, labor, technology, and credit. A more difficult but equally important challenge is to foster change in the prevailing social norms that currently limit women's land rights.

## Joint titling for shared benefits

New research on gender and land ownership suggests that policy reform aimed at reinforcing joint ownership of land is a promising alternative to the "zero sum game" of men's versus women's land rights. This approach can give both men and women stronger incentives to work together to enhance their land and livelihoods.

Joint titling in Vietnam, for example, has strengthened women's land rights and shown potential to improve both their well-being and that of their children. Moreover, contrary to a frequent argument against women's land ownership, Vietnamese researchers have found that crop yields on jointly titled land are no lower than on land titled to men (Sproule et al. 2015).

Similarly, under a joint titling scheme in West Bengal, India, inclusion of women as co-owners of the land led to more secure tenure and increased agricultural investment, while also giving women a stronger role in decisions about food and agriculture (Santos et al. 2014).

## References

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