

ENHANCING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO LANDED ASSETS AND NATURAL RESOURCES

"Strategies for Eradicating Poverty to Achieve Sustainable Development for All"

A note for the UN Expert Group Meeting

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Gender, race, caste and ethnicity all affect the risk of poverty and the prospects of eradicating it. Gender cuts across other dimensions of intersectionality. This note will thus focus on gender and poverty, and particularly on the effect that access to private property resources such as land, and public resources such as forests can have on women's and their household's risk of poverty, and their resilience to shocks and disasters.

A. Private assets, gender and poverty: the links

1. There is substantial evidence that a lack of assets, especially immovable assets such as agricultural land and homesteads, is linked with higher risks of poverty among households. In fact, in some countries, asset ownership or its lack is now used as one measure for identifying the poor.
2. However, the risk of poverty is much greater for women and children relative to men, not only in landless households but also in landed households, due to inequalities in intra-household distribution of resources for nutrition, health care, education, and so on. Moreover, women can face poverty and destitution even in well-off households if they have no immovable assets of their own, in case of marital or household breakup.
3. Movable assets such as small cattle or jewellery which are the assets women typically own, are often the first to be sold by households as a coping strategy during climatic disasters such as drought, famine, etc., while immovable assets such as land (typically owned by men) tend to be retained, thus increasing the vulnerability of women and dependent children to abandonment, and decreasing their ability to recover after a disaster.
4. Assets in the mother's hands are significantly more likely to improve child survival, nutrition and health outcomes than assets in the father's hands. In other words, assets for women can help eradicate both household poverty and intergenerational poverty.
5. Owning immovable assets such as land and housing is found to reduce women's risk of domestic violence and so improve their health, ability to work outside the home, and participate in public institutions. This inadequately recognised dimension can be of particular importance in enabling women to move out of poverty.

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B. Public assets, gender and food security: the links

1. Food insecurity and poverty are linked not only to lack of access to private resources such as land but also to public resources such as forests and local commons. Forests and common lands are found to contribute substantially to the nutrition of rural households both directly through gathered uncultivated food, and indirectly by providing inputs (green manure etc.) for agriculture, and daily cooking fuel such as firewood. This dependence on common property resources is much greater for poor households and for women, since they have few private property resources such as land or finances to fall back on. Much of the collection of forest items for food or fuel is also done by women and female children.

2. Access to public resources, such as forests and local commons, however, rest not on ownership but on having a say in the decision-making bodies of public institutions which decide on the use of such resources locally, and frame policies on their use and conservation, nationally or sub-nationally.

C. Positive externalities of enhancing women's access to private assets and public resources

1. Women are increasingly the farmers as more men move to non-farm jobs. Their access to land and related inputs (credit, technology, information on improved practices, inputs, and markets) would increase overall agricultural productivity and so enhance both household food security and a country's food security. FAO's 2011 *Report on the State of Food and Agriculture*, for instance, estimates that reducing the constraints faced by women farmers could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4%.

2. Gender equality in ownership of private assets and access to public resources can enhance women's bargaining power in households and so improve intra-household distribution. This, as noted, also benefits dependent children.

3. On public resources, women's greater say in bodies which control a country's public resources can enhance not only equity of use, but also the protection and resilience of our natural resources. It has been found, for instance, that forest conservation outcomes are significantly better in community forest institutions which have one-third or more women in their decision-making bodies.

4. Promoting women's access to immovable assets (private and public) thus has synergy with several SDGs: ending poverty (goal 1); eliminating hunger, improving nutritional security, and promoting sustainable agriculture (goal 2); improving the health and education of children (goals 3 and 4); reducing gender inequality (goal 5); and conserving our natural ecosystems (goals 14 and 15).

D. Strategies for enhancing women's access to private and public resources

Overall a strategy for eradicating poverty which focuses especially on enhancing women's access to immovable assets such as land and homesteads, and their access to public resources such as forests and commons, can eradicate both household poverty and intergenerational poverty. Moreover, a productive asset such as land can help

poverty reduction to sustain over time, and reduce the likelihood of a household sliding back into poverty when hit with environmental, economic or social disasters.

To achieve this will require a complex and diverse set of measures tailored to transform institutions that determine access to private and public property resources, such as those listed below.

1. Increasing access to private property resources, for example, will require:

- Gender equality in laws governing inheritance and their effective implementation (via awareness raising, legal aid land support, and social monitoring).
- Policy directives for transferring public land to poor women rather than to their spouses in poverty-eradication programmes and again close monitoring for effective implementation.
- Providing state funding to enable poor women to purchase land individually or in groups.

2. Increasing access to inputs, technology, credit and markets for making agricultural land productive will require measures to reduce gender bias in existing institutions providing these services, and also creating new more cooperative types of institutions that are easier for women farmers to access.

3. Increasing access to public resources such as forests and village commons will need women's empowered and effective participation in community bodies that determine access to and use of these resources. Initially, this may require the creation of quotas for women in such bodies to ensure a critical mass.