



Women's land and property rights – a necessary foundation for economic empowerment

Women's Economic Empowerment. Approaches, Alliances and Strategies for Success?

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By Elizabeth Daley, Mokoro Principal Consultant

Thank you Sally for your kind words of welcome to everyone here today, including our other presenters, whom it is a privilege to be speaking alongside. I would like to offer a personal note of thanks to you from myself and all of us here at Mokoro for the tremendous work you have put into making this event happen today. You have really been instrumental in turning what started out as an interesting idea for a seminar in our discussions earlier this year into what promises already to be a very stimulating and thought-provoking event. Thank you!

As Sally has explained, I'm going to speak today about what I see as one of the key foundations of both women's economic empowerment and their wider political empowerment and equality with men. That is, of course, land – and particularly the right to secure tenure of land. My case is that to be successful, any strategies for women's economic empowerment must address land – whether for farming, housing or any other productive or investment-related use.

To illustrate the fundamental importance of women's land rights to their empowerment, I'd like to draw on two seminal advocates for women here. The first, Professor Bina Agarwal, published a very powerful book 20 years ago this year¹. 'A field of one's own' was the first ever major study of gender and land rights in South Asia. The book's overarching thesis is that, I quote, "the single most important economic factor affecting women's situation is the gender gap in command over property". Professor Agarwal showed clearly and thoroughly the centrality of land rights in explaining gender inequality in South Asia, and the importance of secure access to land for women to improve their economic position and their bargaining power within their households.

The second women's rights advocate I would like to draw on is the late Kaori Izumi. Some of you will remember we held a [Mokoro seminar](#) in her memory in June last year². Kaori was a prolific activist and proponent of women's land rights. One of her major achievements was the convening of an important workshop in Pretoria in 2003 on women's land rights in Southern and Eastern Africa. At the workshop a famous t-shirt was launched. Its slogan – "property and a piece of land give women peace of mind".

In fact what we can see from the work of both Bina Agarwal and Kaori Izumi is that women's economic empowerment is actually what the struggle for women's land rights has been about right from the start. Ultimately, both secure access to land and women's economic empowerment are about peace of mind for women. About independence from men, about being able to stand on their own two feet in supporting themselves and their children, about freedom from fear, insecurity and poverty, about not having to worry about where the next meal or next dollar of income is coming from, and about being able to negotiate on equal terms with men in broader struggles over resources and, indeed, to be treated and respected as equals in all aspects of life.

Land quite literally gives



Robin Palmer wearing T-shirt with slogan "Property and a piece of land give women peace of mind": launched at Pretoria Workshop on Women's Land Rights in Southern and Eastern Africa, 2003.

women peace of mind. Secure land rights are the basis of a secure home and the means of producing food for household consumption or sale. Land is a resource to fall back on after an economic or other shock – not after an earthquake or tsunami perhaps, but usually. Land or other forms of property are assets to bring into marriage. Land can also act as collateral for loans.

The concept of women's economic empowerment has clearly evolved over the years into a much broader phenomenon, with the sectoral areas falling under the women's economic empowerment umbrella now including health and education issues, employment issues and so on. There are clearly many different aspects to women's economic empowerment and among them land rights are necessary if not always sufficient. But property rights more broadly – including rights to hold land, housing, vehicles, bank accounts and all other forms of productive resources such as tools or equipment – these are the very foundation of it all.

Although we may focus on women's economic empowerment as primarily an economic concept, thus as a means of supporting improvements in women's welfare in economic terms by increasing their income and food security – with, in turn, a fairly strong strand of mainstream thinking that these sorts of improvements for women have value mainly because they improve overall household welfare, spending on children's education and nutrition, etc. – in fact true empowerment for women rests on mental well-being and is a political concept.

To bring Bina Agarwal and Kaori Izumi together we might say "Property and a piece of land – a field of one's own – give women peace of mind".

Peace of mind is undoubtedly empowering, especially when you are poor. Moreover, having a piece of land – and secure rights to it, whether it is owned or rented or borrowed doesn't matter, the key is the rights to it are secure – this gives women confidence to take more risks in developing economically and in negotiating over their rights to resources in general – which is fundamentally about politics. So, having secure land rights helps women to be more confident in engaging with political struggles over resources and over sexual and gender politics within their individual households and societies.

Let me give you some examples that I have come across in my work. First from Rwanda, where the 1999 Succession Law made two key changes to property rights in that country. The first change was that couples who were legally and monogamously married were deemed to have joint ownership of all their property, unless they specifically elected at the time of their marriage to keep their property separate. This gave married women a formal share of property rights where before they had none, and the possibility of having their own completely separate property too. Second, inheritance rights for legitimate children were made equal for sons and daughters – both genders were now legally allowed to inherit in equal shares from their parents. Of course there have been some problems in implementation and not all sisters have inherited the same amount and/or quality of land as their brothers. But nevertheless there have been many positive changes and knock-on effects.

When I was carrying out field consultations in Rwanda in 2006, as part of the planning process for the national land tenure registration that has since taken place there, men spoke openly about the value to them of women being able to own land. Both young men and middle-aged men did not see women's inheritance rights as meaning a loss of rights for them. Instead, many were perceptive enough to realize that a woman who inherits land from her parents has something to bring into a marriage – and in Rwanda where the population is very dense and land is at a premium, that property she brings is a valuable asset. This gives her a stronger bargaining position in household relations because it gives her the possibility of leaving and taking her land with her – the idea that Bina Agarwal also talks about in her book in relation to South Asia. So the effect of women being allowed to inherit land is both economically empowering – she has an asset to contribute to the joint household economy – and it is politically empowering because it improves her bargaining position and the likelihood that her views will be more respected. Of course not all men are as enlightened and nor do they all support women's rights. The whole Pandora's Box of gendered social norms and customary and traditional laws and practices also has to be factored in. But having land rights at least makes this kind of empowerment a possibility.

In Rwanda the government further supported women's political and economic empowerment by making it a constitutional requirement from 2003 that all public decision-making committees from the village level up have to include 30% women. Not a parity with men, but it is enforced, and thousands of 5-person local land committees now comprise at least 2 women throughout the country. Along with the property rights they have themselves, this gives women a real political weight, and a real stake in local land management and administration – in decision-making over resources.

In fact we can see the connections between economic empowerment and political empowerment for women most clearly at play when their property rights and land tenure security – their peace of mind – are most visibly threatened. In India there is a case described in a paper I've written with Sabine Pallas that has come out this year in the journal *Feminist Economics*³. In that

case, a whole community was threatened by investors in a special economic zone who were taking over their land. And it was the women, especially the Dalit women, the most impoverished and vulnerable women in the community, who played the key role in resisting the investor and became politically empowered in the process. One woman said they had “no option but to organize” because their land rights and their whole economic survival and mental well-being were at stake.

We have seen the same again more recently in Tanzania in the famous Loliondo case. The Maasai rangelands in northern Tanzania have long been subject to encroachment by investors, especially for tourist ventures, and conflict has been long-running. What has really become interesting over the past year or two however is the extent to which Maasai women have become involved in the grassroots movement to oppose land grabbing in this area. And they have had major success, with the Prime Minister of Tanzania intervening in the case to support them. Earlier this year I worked on a research project around pastoral women’s land rights in northern Tanzania. It is not yet published but I would like to quote here from the draft report:

“In the Loliondo case, Maasai women have been at the forefront of the community-level mobilization and solidarity, with “many walking dozens of miles across the bush to assemble the community for demonstrations and meetings” (Ngoitiko & Nelson 2013). As...Executive Director [of the Pastoral Women’s Council] has explained [and quoted in Maliasili Initiatives Annual Report for 2013]: *“These women have been empowered over the years and have deep knowledge about what is happening and are therefore not willing to sit quietly as their livelihoods are stolen away from them...without land there is no life for them” ...*”⁴

What this research project found was that while women are at the forefront of struggles to defend land rights because they are so critical to their peace of mind, women’s capacity for mobilization in the Loliondo case had arisen because of long-term engagement of local NGOs in establishing Women Leadership Forums, promoting gender equality, facilitating local collective action around land rights and providing women with information about their rights. To badly coin a phrase, the egg of economic empowerment, via support for women’s land rights, has grown into the chicken of broader political empowerment and mobilization. But at the same time, women are more likely to succeed in securing and defending their land rights if they have already been politically mobilized or supported to organize.

I would like to finish by drawing your attention to this guide – [Governing Land for Women and Men](#) – which we wrote with FAO to provide technical advice on ensuring the achievement of gender equity in the implementation of the [Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security](#) – what you will more commonly perhaps know of as the Voluntary Guidelines, or VGs⁵. The guide provides dozens of examples of how women’s land rights can be claimed and strengthened in practice, including through women’s full participation in decision-making over resources. And so I haven’t really touched on these practical issues much in my presentation today because I would urge you to read it very comprehensively here instead!

The guide’s key message is that having land rights is not enough, but that gender equity demands that women participate on an equal basis alongside men in all aspects of land governance, from the grassroots to the highest policy-making and decision-making circles. And this is for two reasons. One is of course the purely human rights case of gender equality as a good in its own right. But the second is that while secure tenure of land is essential to individual women’s economic empowerment, it is women’s equal political participation alongside men in decision-making at all levels about the use and allocation of all productive resources which is the other half of this equation.

I hope I have convinced you that women’s land and property rights are a necessary foundation for women’s economic empowerment as well as being central to the interconnection between women’s economic empowerment and their political empowerment. Because land is both economic and political, and so too is women’s empowerment.

References

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