

**Rural women to fight for their right to land  
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The Commission for Gender Equality has put the land restitution programme at the top of its agenda for the coming gender summit to be held in August

The commission wants to sensitise land reform policy about gender issues, and to devise strategies to ensure land access and security of tenure for rural women as part of an overall strategy to tackle rural poverty.

About 18 million people live below the poverty line, with an average income of R353 a month. African women constitute the bulk of poverty victims - with 71% living below the poverty line. While rural African men experience an unemployment rate of 45%, African women have a higher rate of 62%.

Presenting a paper on the topic at the summit, Dr Funiwe Jaiyesimi-Njobe, consultant to the commission, says that one of the biggest problems in relation to gender equity and land reforms is the fact that land is being allocated to 'groups' (such as the Taungs, Mfengu or Khoi-San) which are headed by males. 'This does not liberate women, because of the social position they hold in the patriarchal set-up.'

Njobe says women and communities are viewed as homogenous groups, without any concession to what women as individuals need and want. 'You cannot give women loans and tell them to get involved in sewing projects or beadwork when there might be something completely different they want to do.'

For Njobe, another complex problem is the lack of integration in land allocation. 'There needs to be a holistic approach regarding education, health care, water and agriculture. A further barrier is traditional law,' Njobe says. 'Because of the patriarchal nature of men heading households and farms, by customary practice women were not allowed to own land in their own right.'

Njobe's paper will call for the encouragement of a critical mass of women entrepreneurs in the rural areas - but these women should not be treated as a homogenous group and given projects to manage. Research must be conducted with urgency to find out what the women themselves want to be involved in. 'Funding of projects has gone on for years but they often collapse because of a lack of proper training, lack of skills and no management training. Women have to be commercially directed in poverty alleviation projects.'

She says that one way to create successful women rural entrepreneurs is for city-based projects to move to rural areas, and for grants to stop. Instead, loans should be combined with saving schemes and human resource development.

'Projects keep starting and collapsing. We have got to stop this situation. We have to have development, with confidence, ownership, and low rate loans combined with saving schemes. It's the only way for sustainable development.'

‘The gender summit will come up with specific proposals for women and land reform. The largest section of poor people in this country are rural women. We can't have leaders that move up the political ladder and forget this -get disconnected from the poorest of the poor.’

Land reform has three components: the restitution of land rights, the reform of tenure systems, and a land redistribution programme. Gender equity is meant to permeate these components, according to the Land Reform Gender Policy of 1997, adopted by the Department of Land Affairs.

According to Samantha Hargreaves, the National Land Committee's (NLC) gender expert, there remain significant barriers to women gaining access to land and control over land. Over the next 15 years, according to the new integrated programme of land redistribution and agricultural development in South Africa, 30% of the country's agricultural land should be transferred.

The NLC says gender-specific barriers include the right of an individual to access land is tied to a dependent, spouse or partner, and because of the fact that most households are skewed in favour of male members in the family - be they brothers, uncles, or husbands - land is mediated through them.

While women are not excluded from participating in the programme of land restitution, ‘practice has shown that it is usually men, sons, brothers or uncles - who put themselves forward as legitimate representatives of the family’, Hargreaves says. In addition, ‘experience has shown that women are less likely to be represented on community-based organisations representing claimant groups and are, therefore, not able to push women's interests through the restitution process’, the NLC documentation on gender and land says.

In the case of single women and tenure, experience varies. While they are increasingly getting land as residential property, ploughing is usually prohibited. ‘In the case of married women, rights to land are exclusively mediated through the husband as head of household.’