

TOP POLICY LESSONS IN WOMEN'S PROPERTY RIGHTS

Land is the major source of income for most African households, particularly those engaged in agriculture. In the region, property rights over land are largely governed by informal customary systems. These systems, while deeply rooted in tradition, may not always provide sufficient security of tenure and are often influenced by patriarchal norms that disadvantage women.

The benefits of strengthening land rights in terms of empowerment and investment can be particularly high for women. Throughout rural sub-Saharan Africa, land is commonly transmitted through male lineage, with women accessing land through their husbands. Women's land rights thus often depend on their marital status, weakening their decision-making power within the household. With lower tenure security, women may have less incentive to invest in their land and its productivity. They may need to allocate time and other limited resources to protect their claims and may face steeper barriers to accessing credit because they are less able to use their land as collateral.

This brief synthesizes evidence from impact evaluations conducted by the Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Uganda. It offers insights on: (i) strategies to enhance women's property rights over land, and (ii) the effects of these strengthened rights.

GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 80 impact evaluations in more than 30 countries with the aim of building an evidence base with lessons for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is increasing take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women's economic and social empowerment. The Lab aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.



1. HOW TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

Many African governments invest in large-scale land formalization programs to clarify and formalize land rights. These programs typically engage local communities in the demarcation, adjudication, and registration of their land rights. Important economic goals of these programs include creating incentives among households for productive land use, encouraging long-term investments, increasing their ability to use land as credit collateral, and making land markets more efficient. To promote gender equity, these programs often include targets requiring a minimum percentage of land titles to be registered in women's names, either alone or jointly with their spouses.

Effective measures to promote women's land rights often involve simple, low-cost adjustments to the implementation of land formalization programs. In Uganda, one successful approach involved both (i) providing persuasive information to husbands about the benefits of adding their wives' names to land titles, and (ii) requiring the presence of wives

during the interaction between households and land operators. These combined actions increased the inclusion of wives' names on freehold land titles from 66% to 91%. Notably, offering the titles conditional on the wife's inclusion did not diminish the overall demand for titling.¹ These findings are consistent with evidence from Côte d'Ivoire, which also shows that simple informational and economic incentives successfully encourage men to register some of their land in their wives' names.²

Changing perceived social norms also plays a crucial role in promoting women's land rights. In Mozambique, a survey with rural households found that actual public support for women's land rights was high—80% among men and 84% among women. However, respondents significantly underestimated this support, believing that only 47% of men and 68% of women in their communities supported these rights. Correcting this misperception through a simple information campaign nearly doubled the number of married couples opting to split land ownership between spouses in the context of a systematic rural land registration project.

¹ Cherchi, L., Goldstein, M., Habyarimana, J., Montalvo, J., O'Sullivan, M., & Chris Udry. (2022). *A Seat at The Table: The Role of Information, Conditions, And Voice in Redistributing Intra-Household Property Rights*. *Economic Development & Institutions*.

² Donald, A., Goldstein, M., Hartman, A., La Ferrara, E., O'Sullivan, M., Stickler, M., World Bank, & Innovations for Poverty Action Peace and Recovery Program. (2020). *What's Mine Is Yours: Pilot Evidence from A Randomized Impact Evaluation on Property Rights and Women's Empowerment in Côte D'Ivoire*.

2. WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS?

Investment:

A pilot land formalization program in Rwanda doubled rural households' investment and maintenance of soil conservation measures such as bunds, terraces, and check dams. This effect was particularly pronounced among women who had previously experienced higher tenure insecurity.³

A large-scale land formalization program in Benin resulted in a 23-43% increase in the probability that households would grow perennial cash crops and invest in trees on their parcels. The study also found that because of the program, female-managed landholdings in treated villages were more likely to be left fallow—an important soil fertility investment. Consistent with the notion that women may allocate limited resources to protect their claim over their land, we found that women responded by shifting investment away from relatively secure, demarcated land and toward less secure land outside the village to guard those parcels.⁴

In Uganda, encouraging households to register a parcel of land in women's names significantly increased the likelihood that households used the parcel to produce coffee, the main cash crop in the study area. This effect translated into a substantial increase in household income from crop sales. The impact of this intervention was comparable to that of a large cash grant directly targeted to women and labeled for productive investment. Interestingly, the study found that these two interventions acted as

substitutes rather than complements in generating these impacts.

Diversification:

Another study tested a pilot land titling intervention that took place in an urbanizing area located in the Central Region of Ghana. The analysis found that land registration led to a decrease in the amount of agricultural labor, accompanied by only a small reduction of agricultural production and no changes in productivity. Instead, there was a general shift to nonfarm economic activities, and women's business profits increased considerably.⁵ A similar pattern was eventually detected in Rwanda when we tested the national scale up of the pilot land formalization program discussed above. There we also found a reduction in farm labor, without reducing agricultural yields; and an increase in off-farm employment, wage income, and household food security.

Women's Empowerment:

The study in Uganda also found that registering land in women's names significantly increased their decision-making power within the household, particularly regarding income allocation. These improvements were evident five years after the intervention, highlighting the long-term benefits of secure land tenure.

In Benin, the large-scale land formalization program discussed above bolstered widows' rights to remain in their communities, especially those without male heirs. This stability was linked to strengthened perceptions of women's land rights within the community and increased intra-household decision-making power over land resources.

3 Ali, Daniel Ayalew; Deininger, Klaus; Goldstein, Markus. 2011. *Environmental and Gender Impacts of Land Tenure Regularization in Africa: Pilot Evidence from Rwanda*. Policy Research working paper; no. WPS 5765.

4 Goldstein, M., Hounghbedji, K., Kondylis, F., O'Sullivan, M., Selod, H., Africa Region, & Development Research Group. (2015). *Formalizing Rural Land Rights in West Africa: Early Evidence from a Randomized Impact Evaluation in Benin*. In Policy Research Working Paper (No. 7435).

5 Agyei-Holmes, Andrew; Buehren, Niklas; Goldstein, Markus P.; Osei, Robert Darko; Osei-Akoto, Isaac; Udry, Christopher Robert.



And the pilot land registration intervention in Rwanda significantly reduced inheritance-related uncertainty. Children were particularly affected, with the intervention increasing by 13 percentage points the likelihood that they will inherit land. The gender bias in inheritance intentions was virtually eliminated, with girls' planned level of land inheritance almost identical to that of boys.

Exploring Alternative Approaches:

Beyond land registration, alternative methods like formalizing marriages are being tested to enhance women's property rights over land. For instance, in our Côte d'Ivoire study, the impact of formalizing marriages is being compared to registering land plots in women's names to identify the most effective strategies for securing women's rights.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening women's land rights through targeted, practical interventions can yield significant economic and empowerment benefits. Encouraging active female participation in land formalization programs, correcting misperceptions about community support, educating men through persuasive information, and providing economic incentives are all effective steps towards achieving gender equality in property rights over land. The evidence shows that strengthening women's land rights can foster greater investment in land, promote economic diversification into off-farm income-generating activities, and enhance women's empowerment.

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