



Protecting and Strengthening Women's Land Rights in the Face of COVID-19 and Beyond

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The fundamental rights of women and men are crucial to the whole of the development agenda. With just under 10 years left before the world achieves the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), understanding how the world has addressed women's land rights becomes even more crucial if the world is going to reach the goals of ending hunger, ending poverty, and achieving gender equality. Land rights for women are crucial for ensuring food and economic security. In addition, securing women's control and ownership of land is important to women's empowerment, higher levels of investment and productivity in agriculture, and higher incomes and greater economic well-being for women and their households. Land is much more than an economic asset; it is a source of identity in many cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to worsen the situation by exacerbating existing inequalities. Therefore, understanding how women's land rights can be advanced by all stakeholders is crucial in promoting sustainable and equitable socio-economic development for all.

There has been some progress in advancing women's land rights globally. For example, the [Voluntary Guidelines on Governance of Tenure](#) (VGGT), developed in 2012, is a tool that is aimed at promoting secure tenure rights for all, including women. However, more needs to be done to ensure political will in the implementation of the guidelines. With this in view, the third virtual dialogue of the Parliamentarians Actions for Gender Equality and Resilient Food Systems in Response to COVID-19 series focused on protecting and fostering women's land rights. In the framework of the ECOWAS Network of Parliamentarians on Gender and Agriculture Investment Investments in Agriculture and Food Security, supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and Oxfam, the discussion gathered parliamentarians, civil society organizations, traditional authorities, and government representatives to share their views on and experiences in advancing land rights for women.

The meeting shared some of the progress made to date. At the policy and legal levels, there has been progress in inheritance and spousal consent for land transactions. Joint titling has improved over the past 15–20 years, resulting in more women having access to land titles. However, more needs to be done to support women's land rights. Both

formal and customary justice systems can underserve women and fail to adequately address inequalities and create opportunities for women. Discriminatory practices need to be addressed by getting traditional leaders to engage with the formal justice system, build awareness, identify common ground, and recognize why gender rights matter. More also needs to be done to transform land titles to provide better outcomes for women. Further, critical support is needed to develop gender-responsive land leasing laws that will enable women to lease land and participate in rental markets, resulting in enhanced economic opportunities and the promotion of gender equality.

At the grassroots level, some progress has been made in supporting women's groups to organize and build their voices and agency. Some progress is made in collecting and analyzing women-driven data that informs programs and policies. However, more needs to be done to support the use of paralegals in statutory provisions, which can complement other actions to support women's land rights and tenure security, enhance community-level awareness, and bridge the gap between formal and informal justice systems. They can also serve as conflict mediators. Supporting women to have an active and meaningful voice in land-use governance processes can help to ensure that women are not just passive recipients but powerful agents of change.

Some other recommendations from the discussion include:

- At a continental level, it is crucial to work together to ensure that the African Union target of reaching 30% documented land rights for women is achieved by 2025.
- Ensure that women meaningfully participate in land governance matters and take leadership positions in land committees at local, municipal, and national levels.
- Ensure all gender discriminatory practices are removed in legislation and include safeguards to protect the rights of women.
- Promote dialogue and collaboration between different stakeholders, including traditional leaders, formal systems, civil society, and parliamentarians, to enhance the understanding of how customary practices and procedures can be reinforced, modified, and adjusted to address discriminatory practices and promote positive outcomes for men and women.
- Strengthen the collaboration between customary and state actors to ensure that land decisions are made in accordance with local communities' needs, desires, and collective ownership.
- Support the establishment of paralegals in a community to address the bureaucratic and costly justice system.
- Support the organization of women. Women at the local level are highly connected and can mobilize and create their own critical mass, enable the access of information, build capacity, and create community land watchdog groups that can help access justice and undertake awareness and legal training.
- Harmonize laws, policies, and programs on land with family, marriage, inheritance, and investment laws and ensure that they are gender responsive.
- Build awareness of the rights of women under the statutory and customary justice systems and support gender-responsive digitization.

- Improve the collection, processing, and use of gender-disaggregated, land-related data in terms of ownership control to inform policy and monitor progress toward the attainment of women's land rights.