



CSW62 Multi-Stakeholder Forum

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls
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Panel 1: “Ensuring rural women’s land rights, tenure security, and strengthening food security and nutrition for rural women and girls”

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Introduction: Landesa, is a leading international land tenure organization dedicated to securing gender-responsive¹ land rights for the rural poor with experience in over 50 countries. In the last 50 years, we have worked with governments, civil society, international institutions, and corporations to help change and implement land reform laws, policies, and programs that have provided secure, legal land rights to more than 120 million families living in poverty.

Landlessness and weak land rights are root causes of poverty, conflict, inequality, and environmental degradation. Globally, land is an enormously powerful asset, but also has a social function. Both the economic and social aspects are central to advance gender equality and empower rural women and girls. It is widely recognized both that rural women and girls are sustained by agriculture and natural resources, and that the accumulation of assets provides a path out of poverty. Legal control of land, and legal and social recognition of rural women’s use of and rights to land, can also have catalytic empowerment effects, increasing women’s influence and status in their homes and communities.

The Secretary General’s Report on *“Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls”* affirms that inadequate legal and policy frameworks, ineffective implementation and discriminatory gender norms and practices are consistent barriers to the realization of rural women’s and girls’ secure land rights. However, these systemic barriers and ineffectiveness can be tackled with political commitment, investment and collaboration. Given the know-how in this field of land tenure and concrete examples of what has worked and what has not worked, a road to enforceable and effective implementation of legal and policies reforms can be achieved by the full integration of a gender-responsive framework at all stages of the process.

Land and agrarian reform, allocation, and titling or registration programs, for example, have improved the challenge of land insecurity. But often target the household, or assign ownership to the “head of household” most frequently defined as a man. Because women are typically not considered as land-owners or farmers, they are usually excluded from extension and agricultural support programs and financial credit and loans which are necessary for effective use of land.

Against this backdrop, gender bias must be addressed in implementing legal and land policy reforms, even when land laws exist and contain gender equal provisions.



Since 2010 Landesa has been working in partnership with the government of Odisha and West Bengal towards the implementation of the State government land allocation program including homestead and agricultural land. In providing legal advice and capacity development support, we have helped secure 343K land titles in impoverished rural communities. In implementing this program, 227K families have secured homestead plots and 116K families' secured field plots with average 1.6 acre of land. In applying Landesa's gender-responsive framework in the implementation process, these programs have been able to guarantee that 91% of the 343K land titles included women's names. Through Landesa's efforts together with the government of India, women who have just been granted legal rights to land in India often tell us that they now feel empowered to speak up at home and at village meetings, and they can access government services like nutrition programs, work programs, and other initiatives meant to help the poor.

Nevertheless, the latest household surveys conducted in 17 provinces that my colleagues carried out in Uttar Pradesh, found that women's names are not always included on the land certificates; some women will be systematically left out. Much of that is not because of local law discrimination, but rather the way existing practices that are deeply biased or discriminatory customs and belief impact voluntary gender equitable implementation. This shows that intentional and integrated gender-responsive approach to implement laws, policies and programs related to land rights reform is urgent. In implementing land regularization program with the government in Uttar Pradesh, local officials neglect to include wives' names on family's land documents because rules do not explicitly stipulate they should do so, though it does for land allocation to couples. [Landesa of course is working with the government to address these gaps]

Documenting women's rights is essential to promote rural women's equal access to, control over and ownership of land and other productive resources.

At Landesa, we have seen firsthand positive impact of effective implementation of such effort when women held land title in rural Vietnam, their households became more prosperous, poverty reduced and capital investment levels has shown to be higher than in households where a man holds sole title.

Despite these examples of positive impacts derived from documenting women's rights, there are many ways in which formalization of land tenure has disadvantaged women whose derivative and informal rights were not included in formalized registration. This can be changed with specific policy and addressing gender bias in implementation.

A call for **new thinking** on how to tackle entrenched gender inequalities, new collaborations and partnerships across government, women's organizations and the private sector. New investments in processes of change can unlock the grip of these gender norms and enable rural women's leadership to thrive. **Change is possible.**

ⁱ "Gender-responsive" means that rather than only identify gender issues or work under the "do no harm" principle, a process will substantially help to overcome historical gender biases, to "do better," in order for women to truly engage and benefit from these actions. *See* UN Women, How to Manage Gender-Responsive Evaluation, available at: <http://genderevaluation.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/gender%20evaluation/handbook/evaluationhandbook-web-final-30apr2015.pdf>