WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO IMPROVE WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS?

Land is a key productive asset for rural households in Africa—and property rights thus play a critical role in determining who can own and access this fundamental resource. Reflecting underlying gender inequality in the society, however, customary norms confer disproportionately weaker land rights to women, feeding into a cycle that limits their economic opportunities. Weaker land rights have tangible effects for African women, who are less likely to report owning land, or to have documented ownership of it. With lower security, women must spend more time guarding their property, which leads to inefficient use of their time and labor. Overall, these factors can keep women from investing in their land and its productivity, and keep women from capitalizing on their land’s potential as collateral. The World Bank Africa Gender Innovation Lab has been working to generate rigorous impact evaluation evidence to determine how stronger land rights can improve women’s economic empowerment across Sub-Saharan Africa.

LAND FORMALIZATION

Large-scale land formalization programs, which specify ownership and usage rights, can resolve some of the issues exacerbated by insecure land tenure for women. Typically, land formalization programs involve a
systematic land demarcation process and provide formal evidence of land rights. GIL evidence has documented positive impacts for women from land formalization programs. While effects on investment have varied in different contexts, results from these programs indicate large shifts in labor. Individuals move from their farms to higher-value activities—suggesting that stronger land rights can act as seeds of structural transformation. The different effects on investment or lack of effects on credit however, point to a need for further research into policy to correct these market issues.

Rwanda: Default Joint Titling
In Rwanda, GIL evaluated the effects of the Land Tenure Regularization program: a nationwide, low-cost systematic land adjudication and registration program. Supported by DFID and the World Bank, land parcels were demarcated in the field by locally trained surveyors, in the presence of land owners and neighbors—and then mapped. GIL found that the pilot version of the Land Tenure Regularization program increased women’s land investment by 19%—roughly two times the effect registered for male-headed households. The evaluation also uncovered the need for the inclusion of non-formally married women, such as those with common-law unions, when designing a formalization program to ensure that no groups are left behind.

Informed by this finding, the Government adjusted the design of the program before it was scaled up nationally. Preliminary evidence from this shows that the program has increased rural households’ welfare by freeing up farm labor for more productive uses. The program has led to a reduction in farm investments and farm labor effort, without reducing agricultural yields, and an increase in off-farm employment, wage income, and household food security. These effects do not vary by gender, which suggests that women and men equally benefited from the program.

Ghana: Registration in Peri-Urban Areas
In Ghana, the Lab is evaluating a pilot Land Titling program funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and implemented by the Millennium Development Authority (MiDA) that demarcates, registers, and titles land plots in a peri-urban areas.

Results show that while the program was successful in registering land in the target areas, the registration did not translate into increased agricultural investment or credit-taking. Instead, households did less agricultural labor—which led to a small reduction in agricultural production, but no changes to productivity. In general, people shifted to economic activity off-the-farm. For women in particular, there is a considerable boost in business profits.

Benin: Community Demarcation
In Benin, GIL is evaluating the Plans Fonciers Ruraux (PFR) program. Funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation, each community identified and demarcated all land parcels, mapped out customary rights, and laid cornerstones to explicitly mark boundaries. Land ownership was formally documented through land certificates, delivered to the individual landholders. Results showed that households that underwent this program increased long-term investments in cash crops, such as oil
palm and teak, by 39%. Tree planting also increased by 43%. Female-headed households were more likely to fallow their land, a critical element of soil fertility. However, women moved their agricultural production from land that had been demarcated to less secure, non-demarcated land outside the village—presumably to guard the land that was now less secure. Thus, when designing these types of programs, it is critical to conduct thorough land use investigations.

A second, ongoing study shows that even five years after the demarcation program, long-term crop investment has increased. Further, women from beneficiary communities are more likely to remain in the longitudinal survey, indicating that they are more likely to retain their land following the intervention. This result is driven by households of widowed women, suggesting that the program enabled them to remain in their original dwelling. GIL’s analysis also reveals that the land intervention leads to shifts in planned inheritance patterns—away from sons, and towards daughters and wives.

**ENCOURAGING CO-TITLING**

For women who have few legal claims over their land, formal recognition of their land assets could help to increase their land tenure insecurity. However, **social norms may prevent men from co-titling their land with their spouses.** GIL evidence has found that **small nudges can be effective in encouraging men to include their wives in registration** and co-title their land in the names of both spouses. This provides another potential route to more secure land rights for women.

**Uganda: Nudging through Educational Videos and Conditional Subsidies**

GIL evidence from Uganda suggests that a conditional subsidy and an educational video can be effective tools to increase women’s documented land rights. In the program, one group was offered a fully subsidized title for one of their land parcels after being shown an educational video clip about the general benefits of titling. In a second group, some households were shown an enhanced version
of the video containing information about the benefits of female-co titling. For a third group, the land title offer was conditional on registering the wife as a co-owner of the land. Results show that even in the absence of any particular incentive to do so, about 62% of households were willing to co-title. Providing a subsidy for the title, conditional on the wife’s name being included, raised the demand for co-titling by 50% without any negative impacts on the overall titling rate. Providing the educational video raised the demand for co-titling by 25%. Both instruments can thus be useful ways to get more women formally registered. The next stage of the research will examine the gender-differentiated impact of titling, co-titling, and credit on household investments, productivity, and welfare.

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