Women’s Land Rights in Zimbabwe

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Broadening Access and Strengthening Input Market Systems
This publication is provided by the BASIS Management Entity
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25 June 2001
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Introduction

The question of land is currently one of the much talked about topics in various circles in Zimbabwe. Differing points of view are expressed by different people depending on one's orientation and influencing force. According to Moyo (2000) the Land Acquisition Act of 1992 was a formal recognition by the government that the first land reform process had not been satisfactory. He adds that black business people felt discriminated against in financial markets and that their lack of access to land ownership deprived them of the collateral to mobilize resources. From this perspective the land question would be about correcting colonial injustices.

However, while colonial injustices are being corrected, post-colonial injustices are emerging and these have manifested in the discrimination against black women by black men. Land policies have been developed but as Moyo (2000) argues there has been inconsistent implementation of these policies by the Government of Zimbabwe. This would perhaps explain the poor implementation of the 1999 Draft National Land Policy, which sought to address gender in the Zimbabwe land reform program but with little fulfilment. The question is: who suffers from such "oversights" on the part of policy makers and who benefits?

Definition of Land

Viewed from various perspectives land can mean different things to different people. However, what many definitions have in common is that land is a source of economic viability for people, which explains why it is a much contested asset and why it is important that Zimbabwean women claim a portion of the precious commodity. Moyo (1996) asserts that "land underpins the economic, social and political lives of the majority of people in Zimbabwe." This invariably includes women, as they are also part of the population of Zimbabwe. It is therefore important that women are able to assert their rights to this finite resource.

Describing land from a Marxist - Leninist perspective, Gutto (1986) argues that "he who owns land owns everything extending from the heavens to the depths of the earth." Such conceptualisation of land is very much consistent with the view held by many Zimbabweans today.
It therefore goes without saying that housing, roads, and rivers are part of the land. Ownership of land therefore also includes whatever else is derived from it. If its wealth that is derived from the land, then the owner is also likely to benefit from this commodity. The questions to ask include: Who benefits from the land? Who controls the proceeds? And who has the legal right over the land?

It is these questions that have to be considered today in addressing the issue of women’s land rights in Zimbabwe. Clearly if land is a source of economic viability, women should also be able to claim it without having to literally "ride on someone’s back" to enjoy the commodity and the products therefrom.

**Distribution of Land in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe has 39.6 million hectares of land, of which 6 million hectares are for national parks, roads, dams, and infrastructure. The remaining 32 million hectares are divided as follows:

- **16 million hectares** – communal areas of which 7% is in agro-ecological region 3, 4 and 5, which are sub-marginal, unproductive land and approximately 6 million people live in these regions.

- **3.5 million hectares** accommodate 430,000 people and this is mostly inhabited by communal farmers on resettlement land.

- **1.4 million hectares** are used for small-scale commercial farmers and this accommodates 160,000 people.

- **The large-scale commercial farmers** occupy 4,700 farms on 11 million hectares, much of which is prime land.

- **Half a million hectares** are owned by parastatals.
The critical issue is that vulnerable and food insecure people are on the 16 million hectares of mostly poor land. This is also where many of the women are located (Government of Zimbabwe Document).

The historical process leading up to the current inequitable divisions of land in Zimbabwe can be summarised as follows:

1894 Native reserves were established, which gave rise to the customary law. This resulted in the codification of customary law, a concept that was new to the indigenous African people.

1898 British South African Company established its forces and defeated the indigenous people.

1901 7,000,000 black people allocated 8.4 million hectares of land and 12,600 settlers allocated 32 million hectares of prime land by the colonial regime.

1930 The Land Apportionment Act formalized after recommendations by the Morris Carter Commission.

1945 Land Acquisition began as a result of the returning of white World War 2 Veterans who were mostly whites.

1951 Native Husbandry Act was passed to improve production and conservation in the Native Reserves.

1967 Tribal Trust Land Act was passed, which resulted in land for local people being increased.

1977 The Land Apportionment Act was amended to allow Africans to purchase land in European areas.

1979 Rural Land Act created legal base for resettlement.

1982 Communal Areas Act was passed, which created Tribal Trust lands to allow for resettlement.

1992 Land Acquisition Act saw the designation without compensation except for improvements, of commercial farms.
1993  Rukuni Land Commission was established to study land tenure system and come up with recommendations for the best possible route for resettlement.

1997  Land Reform and Resettlement Program II was launched.

1998  Donor's conference at which Zimbabwe was providing funds to implement its land reform program.


The prominent features of the acts passed before Independence is that they discriminated against the black majority and gave fertile land to the white minority. After independence in 1980, another level of discrimination emerged, which was that of the black men against the black women. It would appear that the discrimination has mutated from a racially bound one to one that is gender bound. As Mpawaenda (2000) notes, the forces that perpetuate racial discrimination are the same as those focusing on gender discrimination and these include power, control, and manipulation. In both racial and gender discrimination, the perpetrator exudes some power over the other regardless of how false this power may be.

The Rukuni Commission came up with 5 tenure systems, which essentially formed the basis for the resettlement program of Zimbabwe. In a report compiled by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (1994), it was noted that only 23% of the women in communal areas had secondary access to land rights; and most married women had no rights to land, except through their husbands.

Finally, at the 1998 Donor's conference, most donors indicated their interest to fund the land reform program, but with a special condition that gender issues be adequately addressed. This may perhaps explain the half-hearted attempt to include gender in the 1999 Draft National Land Policy.
Historical Background to Women’s Land and Property Rights in Zimbabwe

Author and historian, Chigwedere (2000), notes that in the African tradition, women had land rights clearly spelled out; and these were only eroded after 1890 when the colonialists arrived in the country. He argues that the dispossession of land from the African women is more a colonial legacy than a traditional one.

According to the analysis by Chigwedere, the marginalization of women as a traditional legacy is a "figment of women’s imagination." Traditionally, once a woman married and gave birth to her first child she would be allocated a piece of land for her children and family, which also acted as a source of security for the household (ibid). In or about 1900, the colonialists introduced hut taxes and land taxes, which essentially meant that African men had to work in the mines and the colonialists’ fields in order to earn money to pay the taxes. The process was orchestrated in such a way that cheap labor could be secured for the colonial masters, which meant that invariably women had to take on the role of provider for food security.

The indigenous people were thus systematically and deliberately impoverished. This also resulted in the changing roles of women. Women became sources of food security for the working men and de facto heads of households in their own right. Also the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 was enacted to give title to all married African men living on the reserves. Women were sidelined in this process and did not fall into the criteria set by the colonialists for land. It was this process that Chigwedere argues put women in the status they find themselves in today.

However, despite the above arguments by Chigwedere, it is obvious that even before the colonialists came, women’s rights were not explicit. The fact that a woman was allocated a piece of land after she had given birth to her first child, implies that those who were unfortunate to be childless were never considered to be worthy of a piece of land and were thus never allocated. The vegetable garden Chigwedere argues, was probably given to women as a piece of land that was meant to provide for the immediate consumption needs of the family. The whole system smells of a manipulative patriarchal system that gave women half measures in terms of "rights",...
which possibly could be revoked should the husband so wish. Clearly, there was no protection of women’s rights, and this has perpetuated into the current policies and practises. It is therefore quite clear that even in traditional society, women were short changed in as far as rights to land were concerned, and that has perpetuated itself into the modern society.

**Women and Land in Zimbabwe Today**

Women’s access to and control over land and the benefits derived therein is a determining factor in their overall living conditions, particularly in the rural areas. Land is essential to women’s everyday survival, economic security, and physical safety; some would even argue that it is the most critical factor in women’s struggle for equality in gender relations and empowerment. Women’s reliance on land for economic security and survival in Zimbabwe is only deepening as the number of *de facto* and *de jure* women headed households expands. Despite the importance of land to women, the overriding feature in women’s relationship to land is their lack of security of tenure. This is largely as a result of economic and social discrimination against women, more particularly gender biased laws, policies, traditions, and colonial hangovers that prevent women from owning and inheriting land in their own right. This is especially the case in the communal areas where incidentally a large proportion of the population of women is to be found. This skewed access to land has meant that women are dependent on a male link in order to benefit from land.

Women’s lack of access to and control over productive resources such as land is directly related to their poverty in both the rural and urban areas. Some 70% of the rural poor, 80% of whom are women, rely on agriculture for survival. Agarwa (1994) argues that the risk of poverty and the physical well-being of a woman and her children depends significantly on whether or not she has direct access to income and productive assets, such as land. Women's access to and control of land needs to be defined in such a way that women's rights are guaranteed with or without the assistance of the patriarchal lineage. Cross (1999) argues that women's insecure status in land transactions leads to exploitation by men and affects all kinds of land related activity.
For women, land serves as security against poverty – a means to basic needs (Ngubane 1999). Rights in, access to, and control over land and property have direct and indirect bearings on poverty. The direct advantages stem from production possibilities and the indirect advantages include the possibility of facilitating access to credit from institutional and private sources. For women, ownership of land and property can increase women’s status within their communities and increase their bargaining power within their households. Hayson (1999) contends that social relationships and women's status within the household emerge as determining factors of women's ability to command resources, especially land and shelter.

Without guaranteed rights to land, women's economic status is left at the mercy of the patriarchal system, which usually dictates that women have no rights to land. With the current situation where the Zimbabwean economy is shrinking, the prospects of wage employment are almost nought, especially for women (many of whom have little training and/or education). It becomes apparent that women's lack of rights to land have many subsidiary implications for the family. With the majority of male heads away in the urban areas, women have taken over the role of providing for the food security of the family and nation at large. Even with the glaring reality of changing roles in the family, women's land rights are not evolving to depict the reality of the situation on the ground.

Unfortunately for women, this self-sacrifice is not necessarily reciprocated by the male members of the household, as intra-household inequalities in the sharing of benefits from the household resources are common. When male wage earners are present in the household, they do not necessarily share their income with the women in the household, creating a poverty trap. Lacking rights in, access, and control over land and property, women are economically dependent on their spouses or male relatives who in turn choose to retain much of their earnings from their employment and at the same time demanding to control the proceeds from the land.

The question of access to land cannot be effectively addressed without considering women's access to resources like agricultural inputs, access to tillage facilities, agricultural skills required for the efficient utilization of the property, access to markets and support infrastructure by way of roads, boreholes, schools clinics, stores...
etc. It therefore goes without saying that women’s marginal position in terms of access to land also has a bearing on their access to other resources. The resources mentioned above have financial connotations and in many instances women are not able to raise the necessary finances to be guaranteed other resources as they lack the necessary collateral for loans. It is not the intention of this paper to dwell on access to other resources, but it should be highlighted that access to these can be facilitated through use of land as collateral. Many women have failed to access financial loans because they have no control over the resources they produce, and in some instances, because there is no male relative willing to be a garantuer of the loan.

In Zimbabwe, 80% of all household food security is generated by women. The late Gary Magadzire, a former President of the Zimbabwe Farmer’s Union, quoted by WLSA 1997 noted that

"There would be no agriculture in this country without women. The role of women in this country is paramount and is the central pin to agricultural development."

Carr (1997) notes that provision of food security cannot be meaningful without the necessary means and access to resources such as land. If access to land can be granted to women, the dynamics of poverty would change. Commenting on women and food production, Tangwena ( ), recorded the following sentiments by women:

"We don’t have control over land. The land is controlled by men. I say so because we are given 2 1/2 acres to plough, but our husbands do not allow us to plant anything except maize."

"The men make the plan for growing food and cash crops. Our dispute is over the fact that women do all the work but cannot make the plan…"

The above sentiments point to the fact that women are disadvantaged in their right to land, and because of this they have little or no control at all over what happens on the land.
The Legal Framework Governing Women’s Land Rights

Zimbabwe is a signatory to several conventions and declarations, many of which prohibit discrimination against women in any sector. Of significance is the much popularised 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Zimbabwe ratified in 1991. According to article 14 (g), state parties shall ensure that women have the right to have access to agricultural credit loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes. By signing this treaty the Government of Zimbabwe agreed to "incorporate the principles of equality of men and women in (its) legal system, to abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women".

Closer to home, the government also signed in 1997 the SADC Gender Declaration with the aim of ensuring that women are part of the development process of the country.

Enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which Zimbabwe ratified), is the principle of non-discrimination that cuts across all provisions within the declaration.

Article 11 of the International Convention for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has provisions for the right to adequate housing and legal security of tenure. Although Zimbabwe has ratified these progressive conventions, women in the country today cannot claim to enjoy the right to legal tenure or non-discrimination.

All the above ratifications by Zimbabwe are ostensibly an effort to ensure that women are included in the development process and that their basic fundamental rights are protected. However, a closer examination of the situation in Zimbabwe will show that many of these pieces of legislation have not gone beyond mere rhetoric. This is particularly evident when the Constitution of Zimbabwe is taken into consideration. Section 111 b of the constitution states that the government is not obliged to domesticate any international convention, unless they have been passed by an act of
parliament. If promulgated subsidiary laws contradict the constitution, they can be overridden.

Further more, section 23 (1) (a) of the constitution is an anti-discriminatory clause that states that "no law shall make any provision that is discriminatory either in itself or in its effects."

Section 23 (3) of the same constitution states that "nothing contained in any law shall be held to be in contravention of subsection (1) (a) to the extent that the law in question relates to any of the following matters:

(a) adoption, marriage, divorce ………
(b) the application of African customary law in any case involving Africans where such persons have consented to the application of African customary law…….

This section clearly takes away whatever rights women may have had with regard to land and property rights. It makes a mockery of progressive laws passed after Independence like the Legal Age of Majority Act, which in 1982, made women (specifically African women) majors in their own right at attaining 18 years of age.

"The laws of land and property ownership are at the core of problems faced by women in agriculture" (Ncube 1991).

It is a generally accepted fact that where customary law has been applied, it has worked against the interests of women. As Gwauanza (1991) notes, customary rules are defined by men, even where they affect women. The continued application of customary law through various practices has resulted in injustices especially to women.

The Communal Land Act is another subsidiary law that also precludes women from having rights over land and property. This act is administered within a framework of customary law. Those who are part of the community that has been the traditional occupier of the land can only access communal land. This is exclusionary to women, especially in view of the fact that customarily land is allocated to heads of households who are primarily males (Tsanga 2001). Since a large population of women exists in
the communal areas, it becomes evident that discussion of women’s land rights should also focus on the tenurial system around this.

Women’s rights to communal land are clearly unprotected and insecure. A married woman was stripped of her rights when she divorced her husband and was denied the parties’ communal lands’ matrimonial home, which had been established through her efforts while the husband worked in the urban areas (WLSA 1997). In the allocation of this property, obviously due regard was given to the draconian customary law, which dictated that a divorced women could not stay amongst her former in-laws. Furthermore, in many instances, a divorced woman cannot go back to her maternal home. Where does this leave the woman, especially where in many instances, she has no means of support, little education, and poor prospects of wage employment?

In resettlement areas, policies governing this type of land have been highly consistent. While the latest policy (1999) alludes to the consideration of gender issues in the land reform process, it is not clear how women are set to benefit as very few female headed households have benefited. Of the 144 resettled by 1999, only 32 were females. Female household heads are usually poorer than men and enjoy less earning potential and have to double their earning roles and household reproductive roles (Buvinic 1993).

**Problems Associated with Women’s Access to and Control of Land**

**Institutional dualism**—Zimbabwe's legal framework is two pronged, consisting of Customary Law and General law. In the case of land rights, usually the customary law would be applied, meaning that African women are left at the mercy of traditional leaders because customary law is administered by the traditional leadership. In allocating land, although not documented, some women have alluded to the fact that the traditional leaders abused their position by asking for sexual favors from single women in order to be put on the waiting list for land allocation. Not even allocation, but just to be put on the waiting list!!
Women are not a homogenous group, yet there are no provisions for the various groups of women who may be aspiring to be land owners. For example, the single, divorced, widowed women cannot be treated in the same manner because of the diversity of their needs, yet the Draft National Land Policy says very little about female headed households.

Communal land, which is where most women are located, is state land that cannot be inherited should the woman be widowed. Access to this land is hampered by the enforcement of traditional customs in the allocation of procedures and customarily, land is allocated to males, which automatically excludes women from the qualification criteria.

Female headed households face problems of prejudice, which translate into discriminatory practices against them.

There is little evident commitment on the part of policy makers to implement or translate policy into reality. For example, the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Resettlement, and Development made a statement of intent in 2000 to allocate a 20% quota for women of all resettlement land. This is still to be translated into policy and implementation in order to reduce the yawning imbalances within the resettlement process.

**Conclusion**

The major problem that Zimbabwean (African) women face is that the legal framework is set within a context of colonial hangovers where many of the laws were designed to perpetuate a system in which women were objects within the family set up to be viewed only as providers of labor. This is exacerbated by the dual legal system, which at times has provision for conflicting laws and is also dependent on the skin color of the person to which the law is being applied. The use of customary law in issues relating to land sets the ground for discrimination against women in that traditional leaders of many communities hold the view that land is for "household heads" who are in most cases males.
Furthermore, it is acknowledged that women’s land rights are still to be addressed at the policy level. The Draft National Land Policy of 1999 (which at the time of writing this paper was the country policy document on land redistribution) acknowledges that "the demand for land by women has hardly been catered for except with respect to widows and a few among the elite women who have gained access to land in their own right." A publication by a women’s activist organization, Women’s Action Group, acknowledges that "denying women’s rights to land is UnAfrican" (Speak Out). If Zimbabwe is truly an African country, how then does she justify her exclusion of women in enjoying protected land rights?

The Inter Regional Consultation on Women’s Land and Property Rights in situations of conflict held in Kigali 1998 reiterated that "women should have adequate and secure rights to land and property. These rights must be equal to those of men and a woman should not be dependent upon a man in order to secure and enjoy these rights.” It was also noted that “a legal framework for equal rights to land and property for both men and women is a precondition for peace and development” (Habitat pamphlet quoted by Women and Land Lobby Group 2000). If Zimbabwe is concerned about human rights, again how does she justify her discrimination of women in enjoying protected land rights?

The constitution as the supreme law is obligated to advance women and entrench their rights in the country’s laws. Any constitution should acknowledge the fact that men and women are different but that gender equality should denote equal opportunities. Neutral positions may work for the benefit of one group at the expense of another. There is need for the constitution to articulate women’s rights to the extent that sex and marital status are also provided for in the constitution.

Women should not be negotiating for their rights. The argument should now be focusing on access and control of resources for use on the land. Women’s land rights should be a part of the development agenda and strategy.

Perhaps as Mpawaenda (2000) puts it, "the world is a giant affirmative action for men." That however is not to say women should accept this situation. Rather there is need to encourage women to find ways to identify potential opportunities within the
current framework, while at the same time lobbying for the change of the framework. There is need for women to create space for themselves because women’s access to and control of land implies the diminishing of one sex’s power over the other, and power has been known to be difficult to relinquish. This clearly indicates the relentless efforts women will need to engage in to ensure they enjoy the same rights as their male counterparts.

Clearly as WLSA (1997) notes, whether women’s land rights are considered from historical perspective or in the context of today, women have had limited rights to land. As Youssef (1995, 251) notes, "Today both customary religious laws continue to limit women’s direct access to land reflecting that land will be provided to women by their male kin ……as land has increased in value as a market commodity in itself, women's traditional rights of access to land have diminished.”

**Recommendations**

Several recommendations are put forward to suggest ways in which women can secure their land and property rights. These recommendations are in recognition of the fact that women need to go beyond access to land, but also to consider control and ownership issues and that women's land and property rights should be an integral and inalienable part of human rights. However as Cross in Agenda (1999) notes, interventions should ideally include men and women as opposed to women alone. This also conforms to Zimbabwe's adoption of the Gender and Development approach to issues of equality and equity between men and women.

The recommendations include:

**Joint ownership to land**—certificates of title to land should be in both spouses' names regardless of the couple’s type of marriage. Under Customary law most marriages are not registered (ZWRCN, 1994).

"**Head of household**" needs to be redefined and demasculinized to include female headed households in view of the ever changing face of household heads. Agarwal
(1999) notes that private title specifically for rural women is a way of ensuring their access to production resources if they are ever to escape the poverty trap.

On the death of a spouse, the woman should be able to inherit her spouse’s land. She may be expected to go back to her maternal home; but in some cases, she cannot even do that.

Provisions should be made for the domestication of conventions, declarations, and treaties that the government signs. usefulness of these conventions becomes questionable if they cannot be invoked to address the environment of countries that are signatories.

Section 23 needs to be amended to remove the discriminatory clauses. (At the time of preparation of this paper the Ministry responsible for gender issues had started dialogue with civil society and academics to begin this process.)
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