



## Women Empowerment and Leadership in Land Governance

### CAN BE USED FOR:

- Enhancing control and ownership of land for women
- Increasing participation and representation of women in decision-making spaces
- Building platforms and capacity for women to claim their rights in wider society
- Challenging cultural barriers and redefining gender roles

## ► Overview

Access to and control over land often mirrors wider patriarchal patterns in society; decision-making spaces for example are typically male-dominated arenas. By empowering women to occupy leadership roles, claim agency in decision-making processes and advocate for their own rights to land, strides can be made towards gender justice within land governance as well as within wider society.

**“We need to ensure women have rights to the means of production, so that we can speak out about gender-based violence and other rights. Without this we are not in power and unable to speak out from a solid platform.”**

KALPANA KARKI  
(CSRC, NEPAL)



## TOOL #1

# Establish Community-based Women's Groups

Facilitating the establishment and organisation of community-based women's groups is a proven way of creating space and a platform for empowerment. These groups can be informal or have more formal structures depending on the needs of the women involved, and provide a safe space where women in a given community can come together to build solidarity, discuss the issues they are facing, and strategise to develop and implement solutions together.

**“Our theory of change is that people are not beneficiaries but they are change agents themselves.”**

FRIDAH GUTHUKU (GROOTS KENYA, KENYA)

Because rural women own these processes, their work holds far greater legitimacy and relevance. Organising collectively makes it easier for women to work on the tricky topic of land governance, mainly as collective mobilisation helps women to identify the common structural barriers they face. It also reduces risks of censorship or backlash to individual participants, which together increases the chances for success at local or national levels. Connecting women's groups within broader regional or national movements or networks can further amplify their weight and impact. This strategy has been followed by GROOTS Kenya, a movement comprising over 3,500 women-led groups across Kenya, with a direct presence in 17 of the 47 counties nationwide. These groups come together to identify issues affecting them and initiate and actively engage in dialogue with their local administrative authorities on these topics. Similarly, Rural Women's Assemblies in Zimbabwe and Zambia sit together to agree upon advocacy campaigns to pursue and coordinate on putting them into action.

**“On the ground, it is easier to see the challenges. That is why it is so important to have participatory problem analysis.”**

THANDIWE CHIDAVARUME (WLZ, ZIMBABWE)



TOOL #2

## Data-driven Advocacy

Advocacy work can be challenging without good quality and relevant data underpinning it. Data on gender inequality is often inadequate, even more so in relation to access, control and ownership of land. Therefore, training women's groups to generate their own data to support their own advocacy ambitions can help to fill this gap. In addition, training for women's groups, women leaders, and CSOs on how to use this data in wider advocacy activities can significantly strengthen their chances of success.

GROOTS Kenya has found it effective to support women's groups to generate localised data needed for specific projects. Because the data is real-time and contextually relevant, it becomes a powerful form of evidence to back up advocacy demands in public spaces and interactions with other stakeholders<sup>9</sup>. As a result, grassroots women have been able to collectively influence county budgets<sup>9</sup>.

Participatory research also helps to ensure that advocacy efforts target the real issues relevant to rural women. In Nepal, the Community Self Reliance Centre (**CSRC**) has helped to facilitate the creation of Land Rights Forums (**LRF**) at national and local level, with 60 of the 77 districts nationwide now hosting an active LRF. These structures are now independent organisations populated by landless and tenant farmers. With assistance from CSRC, they carry out reviews, field visits and context mapping in order to identify the problems people are facing, which in turn feeds into policy-level advocacy and wider mobilisation. Women's land rights form a central issue and are always emphasised in reports and policy dialogues. The participatory nature of the LRF problem mapping process has built legitimacy and broad-based support for their advocacy work, making it far more powerful as a result.

## Promoting Women's Involvement in Decision-making Spaces



The lack of attention to women's land rights in decision-making at both policy and practice levels stems from the lack of female representation in these spaces. Raising awareness amongst women on where these decisions are made and providing training on leadership and lobbying skills can help to get women into influential seats at the table. In addition, when new policy spaces open up, CSOs can work to ensure that women's involvement is prioritised and that gender perspectives are always on the agenda. Woman and Land Zimbabwe (**WLZ**) uses its position in land policy reform dialogues to advocate for the consideration of gender and marginalised groups to be inserted into every article, and GROOTS Kenya pushes for prioritising women involvement in stakeholder engagement in the ongoing process of digitalising Kenya's land registry.

Of course, decision-making extends beyond the public policy realm. Even if national constitutions or specific policies are well formulated, they may be poorly implemented on the ground, implemented in gender-biased ways or not implemented at all. Public service delivery, for example land registration or agricultural extension services, can be gender-biased in their operations. Empowering women with information on their entitlements as well as where they can go to demand them can form part of a wider advocacy strategy to overcome this imbalance. Similarly, gender-bias in access to justice and redress mechanisms can pose a serious barrier to women's access to and control over land. In Kenya, GROOTS Kenya has been part of pioneering an alternative justice system that works for the wider population at large. This is now recognised by authorities as an alternative to the statutory

- 8 Winrose Mwangi (2018). Our data our strength. [Online]. Available at: <https://womendeliver.org/2018/our-data-our-strength/>
- 9 Equal Measures 2030 (2020). The power of community-generated data. [Online]. Available at: <https://data.em2030.org/stories/the-power-of-community-generated-data-to-drive-progress-on-gender-equality/>
- 10 The Huairou Commission & UNDP (2014). Engendering access to justice: Grassroots women's approaches to securing land rights. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Access%20to%20Justice%20and%20Rule%20of%20Law/Engendering%20Access%20to%20Justice.pdf>

justice system<sup>10</sup>, and provides a more engaging and less intimidating environment for women than the formal legal system.

#### TOOL #4

## Economic Empowerment

Ensuring that women are able to participate in productive activities can strengthen their position within households and wider communities, and in turn allow them to take up leadership positions and push for greater recognition of women's rights to land. CSOs can collaborate with and support women to identify contextually appropriate economic activities which can lead to greater influence and agency. They can also play a vital role in helping to establish and develop these economic activities, for example through facilitating access to markets and finance or assisting with lobbying for community or government support to access and manage land.

If women are involved in the lobbying process themselves, they are more likely to gain the confidence and capacities needed to engage in wider advocacy activities and take on leadership roles in order to demand their rights. Having recognised this, WLZ has worked with rural women and local authorities in Zimbabwe to secure land for women to grow small gardens and sell excess produce to generate income. Women did the lobbying themselves, approaching relevant actors such as local leaders, members of parliament and councillors in order to secure signatures for full ownership of the land. The greater income stability achieved through these gardens has not only given women a foundation to make independent financial decisions, but also provided them with dignity and recognition within their households and communities.

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SERUNI is always looking to work with many organisations. We look at the community composition and try to encourage different groups to work together and form alliances.

TRIANA DHANY  
(SERUNI, INDONESIA)



In other contexts, slow and bureaucratic processes and corruption can mean that pursuing official procedures isn't a viable option. Through 16 female farmer collectives across Indonesia, Serikat Perempuan Indonesia (**SERUNI**) is supporting women to practice agroecology on reclaimed land, growing a diverse range of vegetables for household use as well as for market. They also function as a prototype for alternative modes of collective living, organising families in networks of support to share domestic tasks, family care and field labour. Part of the daily routine is also dedicated to 'intellectual work', in which the group can learn and educate each other about their rights and share their education and skills. Although prevailing cultural perceptions regarding gender roles and outdated national legislation remain barriers, they are now starting to see results in terms of shifting perspectives on the role and capacity of women within the community. A key part of this has been SERUNI's work in helping to form alliances with other groups, for example labour and farmer unions or youth groups, and uniting them around opposition to large corporate land control.

## Things to consider and anticipate

- ❑ **RURAL FOCUS.** Ultimately it is women in rural areas who suffer from unjust land governance practices. Therefore, any movement building and community organising work must be heavily invested in rural areas, and advocacy must be built upon the specific needs of rural women.
- ❑ **COLLABORATION IS KEY.** In many contexts, women find themselves in a position in which it is hard for them to fight the problems they are facing alone. Building alliances with influential individuals and groups is therefore a recommended strategy, such as labour and farmer unions, youth groups, religious leaders, cultural elders, and male champions within communities.
- ❑ **NEW POLICY SPACES.** Whilst offering opportunities, policy reforms can also serve to further embed existing inequalities. CSOs need to be vigilant in ensuring that women's rights and needs are prioritised in stakeholder engagement processes and catered for in new policy outcomes. Offering to link policymakers with community-based women's groups can strengthen public consultation processes and increase recognition of women's rights in policy outcomes.
- ❑ **FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT, NOT NUMBERS.** Simply ensuring that women attend meetings or activities does not necessarily mean that their voices are heard, or their views are taken seriously. Gender justice is contested because it requires men to yield control of decision-making spaces and outcomes over to women. Ensure that women are able to participate on their own terms and that their input is taken seriously.

## Joint Land Ownership Titles in Nepal

**Grassroots campaign for the establishment of a policy allowing joint land ownership titles.**

Community Self Reliance Centre (**CSRC**) was first established in one district of Nepal in order to help tenant farmers in claiming their land rights and obtaining ownership certificates. Impact research found that men were the ones who owned certificates, and so it was felt there was a need for focused work on women's land rights. In 2006, the first national conference concerning women's land rights was held in Kathmandu, serving as the basis for future advocacy. In 2009, policy and advocacy reports were released on the issue and this was followed in 2010 with the organisation of an 11-day march involving 347 women from 42 different districts across Nepal. These actions were designed to put the issue of women's land rights firmly on the national agenda. This level of mobilisation was made possible due to the strength of the national and localised Land Rights Forums (**LRFs**) that CSRC had helped to set up, as well as the focus on building women leadership and advocacy skills within these structures. As a result of the march and follow-up advocacy, the Constitutional Assembly along with members of parliament declared a commitment to improve land rights for women.

In 2011, various CSOs together with the national, regional and district LRFs came together to advocate in a coordinated manner for women's access

to and control over land. One of the major actions that came through this collaboration was the organisation of a seated protest and encampment in the capital Kathmandu, aiming to make the issue visible and incite urgency for change. 50 districts participated, each nominating 20 women and 3 men to attend, meaning that 1,000 women were present in Kathmandu. The encampment involved visiting the offices of different national parties to advocate for women's land rights, as well as a month-long open theatre, with cultural displays, workshops, artwork and traditional food, which was visited by members of parliament and even inaugurated by the head of the Constitutional Assembly<sup>11</sup>. One of the central asks was for national policy arrangements to be made in support of joint land ownership (**JLO**) certificates, that would allow husbands and wives to register for land titles together. Not only would these certificates give women a formal right to the land and property that they work to maintain, but they would also raise self-confidence, social status and improve women's ability to take part in financial transactions. JLOs were thus important in laying the foundation for greater economic empowerment.

Following the encampment and further advocacy work such as the presentation of research demonstrating the need for and potential benefits of JLO, the government eventually agreed to trial a joint ownership scheme. In 2012 the policy was officially announced by the government, with responsibility for implementation being delegated to district governments.

The advocacy focus then shifted to pushing for successful implementation, which proved more difficult than

anticipated. Frontline women leaders needed to advocate strongly at district level for implementation, carrying out training and information campaigns on the importance of the policy for communities themselves as well as district officials and village development committees. CSRC assisted in facilitating these dialogues as well as lobbying district officials. Information on the documents and process necessary for JLC was spread through trainings and pamphlets, and land revenue officials were invited to camps of around 20 families in remote areas in which the process could be completed in a timely and efficient manner<sup>12</sup>. JLO has since been implemented in 50 districts across Nepal, with 9,872 families now registered covering a total of 2,771 hectares of land. The issuing of certificates is seen as a major victory but also as a first necessary step towards empowering women in terms of access to and control over land. CSRC is now working on facilitating local government policies to support women farmers, for example by ensuring that land use plans and the implementation of the National Land Act at the local level are sensitive to women's ownership rights.

- 11 Basnet, J., Dahal, K. and Battistelli, S. (2014) Greater empowerment and security of women through the Joint Land Ownership Certificate, Nepal. Case study of the ILC Database of Good Practices. [Online]. Available at: [https://d303cb4w253x5q.cloudfront.net/media/documents/case\\_studies\\_leaflet\\_5\\_nepal.pdf](https://d303cb4w253x5q.cloudfront.net/media/documents/case_studies_leaflet_5_nepal.pdf)
- 12 CSRC & Oxfam Nepal. Joint Land Ownership Certificate for Equality, Dignity and Prosperity: Resource Manual. [Online]. Available at: <https://nepal.oxfam.org/land-rights-women>