

Strengthening Rural Land Governance and Transforming Positive Social Norms to Advance Women's Land Rights in Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

Established in 1993, Habitat for Humanity Ethiopia (HFHE) is a branch of Habitat for Humanity International, a global nonprofit housing organization envisioned to realize a world where everyone has a decent place to live. It has a mission to build decent & healthy housing for low-income & vulnerable families across Ethiopia with a special focus on influencing housing and land policies. HFHE partners and collaborates with government entities, non-state actors, local partners, coalition, partner families, donor communities, volunteers and others.

The organization implements different projects in various parts of Ethiopia and also runs policy advocacy and awareness raising on housing and land rights at national and grassroots level. One of its active advocacy projects is the Stand For Her Land (S4HL) campaign which is a five-year campaign funded by LANDESA through BMZ focusing on advancing women's land rights by addressing both legal implementation gaps and restrictive social norms.

The major focus of the movement is strengthening the implementation of existing laws, closing the gap between legal rights and customary practices, transforming positive social norms, coalition building & supporting, policy advocacy & awareness to increasing awareness of different stakeholders at large. The movement has been conducted for the past four years jointly with a coalition of partner organizations that have been cascading its purpose through planned awareness raising events and policy dialogue at various levels. The role of the national taskforce on women's land rights has been crucial in terms of facilitating different policy level discussions at various levels.

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

The African Union Declaration recognizes land as central to development and acknowledges land as

a critical resource for sustainable development, peace, and poverty eradication across Africa.

As its commitment to strengthen land rights, the Africa Union requests its member states to ensuring equitable access to land, especially for women, youth, and marginalized groups, and to improve tenure security. It encourages Governments to develop and implement comprehensive land policies that are transparent, inclusive, and responsive to local contexts. It urges to provide equitable access to land and related resources among all land users and landless and vulnerable groups such as displaced people. It strengthens security of land tenure for women which merits special attention.

Ethiopia aligns itself with many international and continental commitments such as the AU Declaration and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. It aligns with SDG target 5 (a) that calls for reforms to give women equal rights to land administration and use. Ethiopia is keen to prioritize human rights of women and women's land right and these are clearly stated in legal frameworks such as the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) that is bold enough to protect the rights of women.

For instance, Art. 35 (7) of the constitution grants women equal rights in respect to use, transfer, and inherit land and recognizes women's rights to property, including land, and mandates the government to take affirmative measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination. Ethiopia's Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation (No. 1324/2024) revised recently and is dedicated to strengthening women's rights to acquire, manage, and inherit land to promote joint land certification for spouses with the names of women clearly, integrating protections for vulnerable groups (example, women, youth and people with disabilities) and it also aims at undoing barriers caused by customary practices and weak enforcement.

Likewise, the Agricultural and Rural Development Policy of Ethiopia recognizes the critical role of women in agriculture & rural livelihoods and includes provisions to promote gender equality including their land rights. It boldly enlists that despite their contributions, women lack independent access to productive resources, particularly land rights. At subnational level as well, the Oromia Regional State Proclamation (No. 248/2023) is championed for its dedication to advancing women's land rights. However, while these provisions and recent reforms exist, their roll out or effective implementation and responsiveness to the customary practices is the area that still needs the concerted efforts of all actors at various levels so that these provisions touch the ground and meaningfully bring positive outcomes in terms of advancing women's land rights in Ethiopia.

THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

This policy brief serves as an advocacy tool to harness collective voices for women to get full access to land rights and property rights and its purpose is

- To highlight social and cultural barriers that prevent women from fully exercising their land rights.
- To inform decision makers, development partners, community leaders and relevant stakeholders to narrow down the gaps between the legal frameworks and practice, and to transforming legislation and restrictive social norms to ensure equitable access to land for women and
- To provide clear and evidence-based recommendations that support the effective implementation of legal frameworks (particularly, the Rural Land Administration & Use Proclamation)

Some challenges inhibiting women's land rights in Ethiopia

Despite progressive laws such as the Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamationsii and constitutional guarantees that affirm women's equal rights to land, many Ethiopian women still face significant barriers in practice.

Limited law enforcement mechanisms and its inconsistent measures, limited access of women to legal bodies and others hinder women's ability to claim and protect their land rights in rural Ethiopia.

Many women in rural & remote communities face barriers in getting access to legal aid in case of problems & disputes such as physical distance, cost, lack of legal literacy and others prevent them from exercising their rights. Limited collaboration and coordination among sectors may also inhibit full access for women to exercise their land right.

Socially, entrenched patriarchal norms, customary practices and low legal literacy among women perpetuate exclusion. Majority of women have limited awareness of their legal rights to land due to limited education and outreach. This has inhibited them from exercising their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DIFFERENT ACTORS

- **Strengthening enforcement of land laws on women's land rights** - Ensure consistent and effective implementation of the Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation across regions, with clear accountability mechanisms, one of which is the promotion of joint land certification
- **Enhance capacity building & awareness** – enhancing the implementation capacity of human resource working in the areas of land governance would suffice their commitment and responsiveness. This could include tailored capacity building training for law enforcing bodies and others to play their respective roles including cascading awareness campaigns at various levels and to inhibit negative social norms & customary practices that undermine women's property & land rights. This also includes the provision of accessible legal aid to help women understand and claim their land rights
- **Harmonizing customary practices with statutory law on women's land rights** - Engaging and supporting traditional & faith leaders and communities to align customary land tenure systems with national laws that guarantee women's rights, using dialogue and other avenues
- **Transform positive social norms through education & media** – This includes use of culturally sensitive education, storytelling and media campaigns to shift attitudes that discourage women's access to land use and administration portuni

ties. These can ultimately help foster more equitable households, resilient communities & inclusive development outcomes

- **Male engagement as allies-** Engaging men as allies and advocates is essential to creating an inclusive and sustainable movement for women's land rights in Ethiopia and their active participation in promoting gender equality can also help dismantle discriminatory norms and practices. Positive male engagement involves raising awareness about the benefits of secure land rights for women, encouraging joint land use & titling, supporting legal literacy, and challenging harmful social norms that exclude women from such opportunities. These can ultimately help foster more equitable households, resilient communities & inclusive development outcomes

- **Strengthening legal & policy frameworks pertaining to women's land rights:** Support and strengthen the implementation of legal frameworks through consistent and evidence-based approach and with accountability mechanism

- **Engaging indigenous & religious leaders:** These leaders have greater influence and respect in the community. Their engagement in various initiatives related to women's land rights would have positive outcomes

CALL TO ACTIONS

Habitat for Humanity Ethiopia and the Country Coalition for Stand for Her Land campaign (S4HL) demand relentless supports and actions from different stakeholders and actors to realize women's land rights. The following are call to actions to help advance the agenda under discussion.

GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

- Narrowing down the gap between policies and customary practices to address the root causes hindering women's full access to land rights. This includes ensuring effective implementation of the revised Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation (No. 1324/2024) in various regional states whilst these laws and legislations are mutually inclusive among themselves and also reflect international standards. For instance, housing & land

policies reflect commonality and the two play complementary roles

- Improving institutional capacity further will help much to spearhead effective implementation of the revised Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation and other relevant policy instruments with improved enforcement of laws and policies as integral for community benefits

- Enhancing grassroots engagement & representation i.e increasing efforts at the grassroots level and providing adequate space for women to be ~~represented in land~~ governance system. This would have value add to spearhead their agenda

- Promoting the revised Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamations (both the federal and the regional states') and relevant legal frameworks widely to enhance the public knowledge and to leverage supports from different stakeholders. This will influence stakeholders to speak about women land right and its roll out. Guarantee joint land certification and transparent land registration processes to sustainably protect women's tenure security

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSO'S)

- Civil Society Organizations are dedicated to implementing gender-transformative approaches in their programming and interventions addressing the root causes of gender inequality. They have an opportunity to challenging negative social norms by way of engaging men, community & faith leaders depending on the viability in their real contexts to bring about sustainable impacts on women's land rights (WLR). They are expected to facilitate legal literacy programs and community awareness campaigns to empower women.

- They have the leverage to empower most vulnerable women and people with disabilities and can build the capacity of these groups to claim their land rights. Given their presence in the community, they have opportunities to catalyze relevant information and campaign at the grassroots level for and on behalf of the community groups and women who could not have the space to speak for their rights. They are advocates, change agents and influencers to ensure what is called 'shifting

power to the communities’.

The CSOs have a chance to form collective voices and to enhance awareness on the Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation through ‘coalition’, ‘taskforce’, ‘networks etc. They can use their credibility and community trust to convey relevant and timely messages to influence actions and behaviors of the people to support the roll out of the legislations

- To maximize their impacts and sustain the voice of the most affected community groups (eg. rural women, people with disabilities etc), CSOs need to strengthen their organizational capacity, programming and networking including fund raising and resource mobilization for their campaigns, preferably, in partnerships with other civil society and women's focused organizations.

UN AGENCIES

- UN agencies in Ethiopia are expected to strengthen their supports for civil society organizations and to enhance their capacity to effectively enhance community-based campaigns and advocacy at various levels on behalf of the most affected community groups (eg. women, people with disabilities etc)
- They are positioned to support the implementation of land policies and their implementation with special focus to ensure women and girls are well recognized and have access to land rights including other basic social & economic services
- They can provide necessary resources including funds and technical supports to support movements, programming and advocacy for land rights of women and vulnerable groups
- Support monitoring, evaluation, and learnings including sharing learnings, lessons and barriers that emanate from the roll out of legal and policy frameworks related to housing and land rights of women will inform decisions and planning

MEDIA

- Disseminate information about the revised proclamations to rural communities in different local languages and expedite information to enhance awareness to wider range of stakeholders

- Promote the importance of women's land rights via different outlets such as question & answer sessions and other means

- Promote information that will help normalize women’s land rights and highlight the benefits of equitable land use and transfers

CONCLUSION

This policy brief is designed to solicit supports to empower women in Ethiopia by promoting their land rights and enhancing their role in decision-making. It addresses both the structural and societal barriers that limit women’s access to land rights. The collaboration of the government, CSOs, UN agencies, community leaders and others is crucial to laying the groundwork for more gender-responsive housing & land policies and practices.

These efforts will contribute to building a more equitable society where women have the knowledge, resources, and institutional support necessary to claim and protect their land rights, ultimately supporting Ethiopia’s broader efforts to achieve gender equality and inclusive development.

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