

# GRASSROOTS WOMEN AND LAND

The Huairou Commission calls for **sustained advocacy** to advance women's access, ownership and control over land and resources at the local, national and global levels by **positioning grassroots women as knowledge holders** in policy making frameworks.

Control over land and natural resources is the most stable means of economic and social empowerment. Land serves a means to meet basic needs, providing improved access to water, health and basic services and a security against poverty. Land, when owned and controlled by women ensures better family health and sustainable community development.

Women with land can provide greater food security, improving the nutritional content of the household and increasing the household's financial security. Research has revealed that absolute risk of poverty decreases as the size,

arability and quality of land holdings increases. Land facilitates access to credit from institutions and private sources, and acts as an asset to access income in a time of crisis.

Land is strategically empowering for women. Women with land are better able to challenge their traditionally subordinate position and their negotiating power increases. Land ownership has been found to drastically influence a women's ability to voice her opinion and make decisions (ICRW, Gupta, 2007). Studies have proven that property plays a protective role against violence, as secure land ownership provides women with a safety net.

Despite this, women are systematically denied rights over and benefit from land. This is due, in part, to structural roadblocks, such as discriminatory administration, governance or adjudication systems around land. Yet more relevant to women in communities, especially throughout Africa, are issues that are intimate to their everyday lives- a lack of financial resources, social stigma, political pressures and negative cultural attitudes against women owning land. Even when women and men have equal access to and control over land, women do not benefit equally, as they have little access to credit and agricultural services in order to make the land fruitful.

Programmes designed to benefit women with land often do not work. This is because women are still regarded by the development world as beneficiaries rather than active agents of change. Development schemes often get in the way of truly helping women<sup>1</sup>. The support given women must be directed to supporting grassroots women's own strategies, these strategies for wider reaching impact for the women themselves, and for larger development.

For grassroots woman in Africa, the land struggle is located in intimate spaces at the community, household and personal level. Therefore, they know what is necessary to overcome their struggle. Thus, the effective solutions and strategies must come from the grassroots women themselves. Grassroots women best know their needs and what they can and cannot achieve. Grassroots women have developed innovative strategies to deal with the challenges of food insecurity, climate change and the impact of small and large-scale asset stripping and land grabbing.

<sup>1</sup>Too often, while organizations may have the same goal of ensuring land rights, they are driven by their different perspectives and needs, which end up imposing development "solutions" that are unnecessary or inappropriate, and overall, dividing the land rights movement. An increasing competition for land, which is permeated by increasing social inequality and class formation, as well as gender inequality, can also result.

“ My main message I want people to know is that we grassroots women are not lying idly by waiting for an organization or government to come and give us land. We know we have to take matters in our own hands...and we are. ”

- Mary, Mathare Mother's ssoiation, GROOTS Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya



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“ Women have decided to be at the forefront of decision-making, to be sure each village has land plans, and that each plan indicates where the land is for farming, livestock and homesteads. They are part of meetings that make these decisions. ”

-Ndinini Kimesera,  
MWEDO, Tanzania

The work of Huairou Commission members on women’s rights to land exemplify a diverse range of experiences and practices across the region that develop, implement and monitor land related processes and community development initiatives. Organized groups of women increase their engagement in decision making processes on land through strategic networking, partnership, capacity building initiatives, action research and dialogues with key stakeholders around land related processes.

The Huairou Commission is active in Africa through its Women’s Land Link Africa<sup>2</sup> (WLLA) initiative. The Women Land Link Africa is a collaboration of existing initiatives that supports and strengthens women at various levels, with particular focus on communities, to have access to and control over land, housing, and property, using both a rights- and development-based approach.



WLLA member’s unique niche is its grassroots driven and led process, promoting self-help, women-centered approaches grounded in local realities. The practices of WLLA exemplify the reality that women’s land ownership is not merely an isolated fulfillment of a right for women, but also a means to solving larger development issues, including mitigating climate change, overcoming food shortages and supporting people living with HIV/AIDS.

The goal of the WLLA is to enhance grassroots women’s ability to gain secure access to land, equitable land access and the resources to make the land productive to sustain their livelihood by supporting their practices, sharing and building an information base, and influencing the formulation and implementation of land policy that respond to grassroots women’s priorities. The WLLA initiative supports practices and processes that help women claim, gain and maintain land and housing.



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**Our strategies to promote women’s access, control of and ownership of land: Community Watchdog Groups, Community Paralegals and Local to Local Dialogues**

Goal	Process	Activity
Claim	Campaigns and information gathering/dissemination Governance and Participation Advocacy- Influencing Policy	Mapping  Local to Local Network Formation
Gain	Direct Service Provision Financial planning and savings	Home Based Care Will writing, Savings and Credits
Sustain	Rights education Informal Adjudication	Tribunals Community Watchdogs



<sup>2</sup>Recognizing the similarity of housing and land issues that exist for women throughout Africa, representatives from four organizations involved in land issues, the Huairou Commission, the Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction (COHRE), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Southern and Eastern Africa Regional Office, and UN-HABITAT Secure Tenure Branch, envisioned this initiative in 2003 to address the growing need to link organizations and share information on the issues of housing and land rights for women throughout Africa. It is now fully coordinated by the Huairou Commission.

With this deep understanding of the needs of communities and strategies to advance land rights at the community level, grassroots women must be positioned as knowledge holders in policy making frameworks.



The Huairou Commission recognizes that this is a critical time, as African nations begin implementation of the Draft Land Policy recently passed by the AU, as well as the introduction of the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program (CAADP) to the region, as well as a variety of sub regional bodies taking up the issue of land, in the face of larger scale land grabs. In all of these processes it is vital that women equality is at the centre and women are positioned in them as key stakeholders and agents of change.

### Grassroots Women Utilize Customary Systems

A specialty of the work of WLLA members is the development of innovative strategies to work within customary systems. While many activists and academics in Africa condemn the traditional system, WLLA participating groups have found innovative ways of making it work for them. They have recognized that the system takes understanding and careful negotiation with chiefs and elders. Statutory laws and practices are introduced to convince traditional authorities that women do have rights, and to find ways to show how customs and traditions actually align with laws.



## Therefore, we recommend:

### To NGO's, especially Land Coalitions:

- Ensure grassroots women's priorities and gender equality are part of your land rights agenda
- Encourage grassroots women in your organization to take leadership roles
- Knowledge dissemination and exchange between women's groups are vital

### To national governments and Bi- and Multilaterals:

- Include community organizations and grassroots women groups in decision making over land and specifically design programmes for land administration and governance that target community women
- Establish a national platform for grassroots women, women farmers, pastoralists and indigenous women to support active participation in the implementation of national land policies and National Land Commissions
- Include and invest in the capacity of women small holder farmers in the designing implementation and monitoring of agricultural extension services and other interventions (short and long term) – focus must be on the local to ensure the most sustainable food production.
- Establish a funding mechanism to ensure grassroots women and famers access financial mechanisms and resources to be able to invest in and benefit from their land

### To sub regional and regional bodies and international organizations active on land issues:

- Put women's empowerment and equality on the land agenda
- CAADP four thematic pillars must integrate women's equality and empowerment
- Guidelines should be developed by the AU as nations begin the implementation of the Land Policy to ensure women are active participants in ensuring the Policy equally benefits men and women.

## Some Key Achievements

### Grassroots Women Break New Ground by Monitoring National Tenure:

In Tanzania, The Maasai Women and Development Organization (MWEDO) works with Maasai women to ensure they have sustained access to land through the full implementation of Village Land Act No.5 of 1999, which enable women partial ownership of family land and grants women land through village level authorities. As a result, 800 women have acquired land and 180 have registered through the land surveyors. This process culminated to several other outcomes, including the development of a formal market place for Maasai women to sell their goods the creation of the Pastoralist Women's Forums in a number of communities, which have enabled 8 women from Kiketo and 6 women from Longido to become local councilors. Furthermore, 2 Pastoralist women from Kiketo and Moruli have been elected as Members of Parliament (MPs), and MWEDO has secured resources to have 10 land plots surveyed, with the goal of securing 20 additional plots. In Kiketo women have secured 20 acres of land and have formed a cooperative to cultivate the land as a group, not as individuals.



### Grassroots Women's Contributions to Secure Women's Assets and Property:

Grassroots Kenya, a network of more than 2000 grassroots women has organized Watchdogs groups in six regions across Kenya. Watchdogs groups provide institutional and participatory protection to guard against property-grabbing, monitor communities for cases of women's dispossession, and raise alarm in instances of eviction. These groups have also served as a platform for grassroots women to access governance institutions, to influence legal structures and to advocate against resource-stripping and the dispossession of women's land and property.

### Building Capacity and Knowledge in Decision Making Processes:

AWARE is a grassroots organization based in Karamoja, one of the poorest districts in Northern Uganda. AWARE trains women in vocational skills, community paralegal processes, and organizes saving and loan groups to build asset security and improve livelihoods. AWARE has facilitated Local to Local Dialogues with elders, traditional leaders, district counselors, local police and other key stakeholders in their community. This enabled grassroots women to lead a debate in their communities to deepen the understanding on issues of access to and control over land and bridge the gap between their experiences and community stakeholders. As a result, 100 land titles were granted to women by traditional leaders of the community and 50 women started processing their documents for land ownership with the support of the community paralegals.



### Grassroots Sisterhood Foundation

has organized women to work within the legal and customary governance system in Ghana to demand land titles and as a result 80 women have land regularized. Through their organizing and Local to Local Dialogues about 300 women have accessed land for block farming a to improve livelihoods and quality of life as well as children in school increased and ability of women to negotiate for land.