

Improving Gender and Women's Access to Land by increasing land availability through land conservation and land Restoration

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Keywords: Gender, Women's land rights, land restoration, land degradation, land conservation.

SUMMARY

Economic forces of demand and supply often play a critical role in price determination of urban and rural lands. This can have an impact on land availability that is within the reach of different income groups. Where land availability is limited in supply, then market forces kick in and the prices generally take an upward trend making it more accessible to higher income earners. In these circumstances, the chances that the urban and rural poor (particularly women and youth), can gain access to land, is slim as they typically do not have the economic resources to out-bid those within higher income brackets. In the face of the triple planetary crises and rapidly approaching milestones of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030, specifically Goals 1, 2, 5, 11 and 15, uncontrolled land degradation from several sources including extreme weather events, is contributing to a further reduction in the volume and quality of available lands. This reduced land availability for access by women and youth, coupled with poverty, marginalization and gender inequality is further widening the gap in land access and ownership, particularly by women. The United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD) is promoting land restoration through its Global Initiative for reducing land degradation and enhancing conservation of terrestrial habitats. The initiative which was launched by G20 Leaders in 2020 has the objective of preventing, halting, and reversing land degradation, with an ambition to reduce degraded lands by 50 percent, by the year 2040. The UNCCD G20 Global Land Initiative (GLI) promotes initiatives, policies and practices that can halt land degradation and promote land conservation and restoration. This can amongst other outcomes, lead to an increase in land availability for gender distribution more equitably. In addition, by promoting the growth of land restoration as an industry, the socio-economic benefits to women and youth in terms of enhanced livelihoods can address poverty (SDG 1), end hunger (SDG.2), narrow the gaps in land access (SDG 5), promote sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) and ultimately improve life on land (SDG 15). This paper makes a case for land restoration and habitat conservation as an economic empowerment opportunity that can improve women's access to land.

Improving Gender and Women's Access to Land by Increasing Land Availability Through Land Conservation and Land Restoration (12460)
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1 INTRODUCTION

Ongoing global discussions and dialogues on land degradation and restoration are connected with three pressing global challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Not only are they intertwined but these three issues exacerbate one another, creating a vicious cycle that threatens the sustainability of our planet's land-based ecosystems. According to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), around 24% of the global land area is currently degraded, with significant implications for ecosystem services, food production, and the livelihoods of millions of people (UNCCD, 2022). Climate change, as one aspect of the triple planetary crisis, is a major driver of land degradation. Rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are all contributing to the deterioration of soils, the loss of vegetation cover, and the disruption of fragile ecosystems (IPCC, 2019). Biodiversity loss, another component of the triple planetary crisis, is both a cause and a consequence of land degradation. The conversion of natural habitats, such as forests, grasslands, and wetlands, into human-dominated landscapes has led to the decline and extinction of many species, disrupting the delicate balance of ecosystems (IPBES, 2019). Pollution, the third element of the triple planetary crisis, also plays a significant role in land degradation. The release of pollutants, such as heavy metals, pesticides, and industrial waste, can contaminate and degrade soils, rendering them unsuitable for agriculture and other productive uses. The UNCCD G20 Global Land Initiative (GLI), is promoting land restoration and this presents an opportunity for women's economic empowerment through their involvement in the land restoration industry. By supporting policies and practices that promote land restoration, opportunities for land reforms can be explored that will take advantage of increased land availability for equitable land redistribution. The starting point is however dialogue amongst land professionals, land managers, land owners and land administrators in the public and private sectors to create an enabling environment for this. Land degradation has an impact on the volume and quality of available land to be distributed equitably.

2 LAND DEGRADATION AND LAND AVAILABILITY

Uncontrolled land degradation reduces the available land for human use and life on earth. When combined with market forces, this can lead to price increases which makes the poor, including women, less able to secure land. Land degradation, driven by unsustainable land use practices, deforestation, and climate change, has led to the loss of arable land, the depletion of soil fertility, and the scarcity of land resources (Doss et al., 2015). Land degradation is impacting on land availability for access by all especially women. Women often play a crucial role in small-scale agriculture, natural resource management, and the provision of household needs, such as fuel and water (Doss et al., 2018). However, the degradation of land, driven by factors such as

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FIG Working Week 2024

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Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

unsustainable agricultural practices, deforestation, and climate change, threatens the very resources upon which these women rely. The loss of arable land, the depletion of soil fertility, and the scarcity of water resources due to land degradation can significantly limit the ability of women to engage in productive agricultural activities and secure their livelihoods (Deere & Doss, 2006). This, in turn, can exacerbate the existing gender inequalities in access to and control over land, as women often face sociocultural barriers, discriminatory laws, and limited economic resources that restrict their land rights and ownership. Land degradation, driven by factors such as unsustainable agricultural practices, deforestation, and climate change, has led to the loss of arable land, the depletion of soil fertility, and the scarcity of water resources (Doss et al., 2015). This, in turn, has significantly limited the ability of women, especially in developing countries, to engage in productive agricultural activities and secure their livelihoods. Two main issues that impact on women's access to land include gender stereotypes and purchasing are these are discussed.

2.1 Gender Stereotypes and Women's Access to Land

Historically, women have disproportionate access to land when compared with men and this can be attributed to a number of reasons such as gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes make broad generalization about the characteristics, roles and behaviours of men and women based on their gender. Gender stereotypes work against women's access to land in different ways. The view that land ownership is best suited to men and not to women because men are better at leadership roles within the family and should therefore be in charge of land is one of such stereotypes. Women tend to be deprived of land ownership in some traditional settings, particularly in Africa. According to Akinola (2018), pre-colonial Africa prides itself on adherence to diverse cultural affinity and traditional belief systems, which defines the place of women in respect to land access, use and ownership. There are certain belief systems that run through most African communities, such as the denial of women's land rights and the patriarchal nature of societies. (Akinola, 2018). Some of these factors present different scenarios as to why women do not have access to land and ownership rights, particularly in Africa. Also, women themselves hold on to some of these cultural norms and stereotypes therefore, in situations where women might have a competitive advantages in terms of higher incomes than men, their ability or willingness to acquire land may be hindered by the cultural norms and their individual belief systems. They ultimately succumb to gender stereotypes which are not in support of women owning land or property. These belief systems which represent the world view of several women may also contribute to instances of limited land ownership by women.

2.2 Purchasing Power and Women's Access to Land

Apart from gender related issues making land less available to women, there are market forces of demand and supply. These market forces shape land value patterns, trends and land prices because these variables respond to demand and supply. Therefore, the ability or inability of supply to match the demand for land can influence land prices quite significantly in either direction. As land supply reduces through degradation, the highest bidder syndrome which characterises the urban property market in particular, enables

those with higher incomes have easier access to the limited land in supply, over those with lower incomes. Women generally have a lower purchasing power than men, due to centuries of discriminatory wages and other forms of discrimination. Refusing credit to a married woman without her husband's signature, while a married man is not required to have his wife's signature to get credit is a gender stereotype. Refusing to accept a woman's salary as the basis for a mortgage because of her sex is another stereotype. This implies that women who do not work full-time because they are providing care for young children, may be denied access to mortgage facilities and deprived from becoming property owners as a result of their part-time employment status. One of the most apparent advantages that higher-income earners possess is their financial resources. With a higher disposable income, they have greater access to opportunities and resources that can positively impact their quality of life. In their study, (Cheung & Lucas, 2016) opined that higher-income individuals have better quality of life. This implies that they can easily afford quality education, healthcare, and other essential services, which can lead to better long-term outcomes. They also have a greater ability to save, invest, and accumulate wealth, further widening the gap between themselves and low-income earners. Beyond the financial realm, higher-income earners may also enjoy various social and political advantages. They often have access to influential social networks, which can provide them with valuable connections, information, and opportunities that may not be readily available to low-income individuals including women. The disparity between men and women's income is still significant and comparatively, fewer women are able to purchase land without the financial power to do so. The UN estimates that on average, women in the labour market still earn 23 percent less than men globally and women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men (UN Report, Accessed May 2024).

The irony is therefore that men with higher incomes, are still better positioned to secure land by inheritance, and in several cases, this to the exclusion of women who ultimately suffer twice over. In some instances, women actually do have rights to use and farm on communal and family lands but do not have the right to own the reversionary title to the land. This limits the use to which the land could be put and prevents development of a permanent nature on such lands. Agrarian land use is traditionally the reason why land is distributed to women. The landscape of careers that women currently engage in is not limited to agriculture any more. As such, as women acquire new skills and now venture in to several other forms of gainful employment including technical and entrepreneurship roles, their land use requirements have also changed significantly and so has their demand for land. Women may be engaged in entrepreneurial positions that land ownership for a such business is a statutory requirement and would need access to land for that purpose. There are several other factors that exclude women from land ownership, but the thrust of this paper is to show how land restoration initiatives can modify or alter this scenario possibly through land redistribution.

3 LAND CONSERVATION, RESTORATION AND WOMEN'S ACCESS TO LAND

Land conservation and land restoration both work in different ways to increase land availability for various purposes including future use. One primary benefit of land restoration in addressing SDG 15 which seeks to promote life on land, is its ability to enhance the overall health and

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Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria)

FIG Working Week 2024

Your World, Our World: Resilient Environment and Sustainable Resource Management for all
Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

productivity of terrestrial ecosystems. By implementing sustainable land management practices, such as agroecology, reforestation, and ecosystem restoration, the degradation of land and the loss of biodiversity can be prevented or even reversed (Mbow et al., 2014). This, in turn, can lead to the restoration of critical ecosystem services, such as soil fertility, water regulation, and the provision of natural resources, which are essential for the livelihoods and well-being of women and youth who often rely on small-scale agriculture and natural resource-based activities. One of the primary benefits of land restoration in addressing hunger is its ability to increase agricultural productivity and food production. According to the United Nations' 2023 report on the Sustainable Development Goals, the number of people affected by hunger had declined from 812 million in 2005-2007 to 660 million in 2019-2021 (United Nations, 2023). This progress was driven by factors such as economic growth, increased agricultural productivity, and targeted interventions to improve access to food and nutrition. By rehabilitating degraded lands and implementing sustainable land management practices, such as agroecology and conservation agriculture, the overall availability and quality of arable land can be improved (FAO, 2019). This, in turn, can lead to higher crop yields and more reliable access to nutritious food, which is especially crucial for women and youth who often rely on subsistence farming and small-scale agriculture for their livelihoods.

While land conservation works by reducing the rate at which land degradation takes place, restoration repairs already degraded lands. Both conservation and restoration increase result in increased land availability. It presents an opportunity for rethinking and re-planning land use in the face of a global call for gender and their land rights. SDG Goal 11 was adopted by the United Nations in 2015 with the aim of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by the year 2030. In this regard, the world has made some progress in advancing gender equality, with improvements in areas such as education, political representation, and economic participation. According to the United Nations' 2023 report on the Sustainable Development Goals, the global gender gap in primary and secondary education had almost closed, and the proportion of women in national parliaments had increased from 19% in 2010 to 26% in 2022 (United Nations, 2023).

Land restoration presents another window of opportunity for women's land rights advocacy groups to penetrate through policy or dialogue to achieve an improvement in women's land ownership. In this paper we advocate a two-pronged approach to achieve this. The first is through women's empowerment in different stages and phases of restoration projects, and two, through advocacy for land redistribution to increase women's land ownership. There are numerous activities associated with land conservation and restoration that can provide employment opportunities across a broad range of skills and competencies. Women and youth can take advantage of these opportunities. A review of two of the key stages in the land restoration process highlights the some of the opportunities that women can take advantage of and these are further discussed as land restoration project planning and land restoration implementation.

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Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria)

FIG Working Week 2024

Your World, Our World: Resilient Environment and Sustainable Resource Management for all
Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

3.1 Land Restoration Project Planning

Land degradation can be as a result of natural disasters, poor land use, oil spill pollution and other forms of pollution, mining of mineral resources, flooding and wild fires, the objective of the restoration is set at the inception and planning stages. Land Restoration project planning is driven by the type of degradation, its causes and impact on life and other environmental media. The overall objective in undertaking the restoration project itself further shapes the planning process. With poor access to land ownership by women, coupled with limited availability of land, land restoration can be a tool to increase the quantity of land available through redistribution. This can serve as an underlying objective of a land restoration project. In this case, the ultimate aim would be to address land shortages and make more land available through restoring degraded lands. The assumption that land can be restored to its original pristine state is rather illusory particularly without any historical data to show what that pristine state would have been centuries ago. Land can however be restored to a historical reference point, possibly to how the land was on the date of an previous Impact Assessment report that was prepared before the degradation occurred. This is more appropriate where the degradation is as a result of human activity.

What is paramount however in setting land restoration planning objectives, is that the biodiversity of land is restored which would enable it to continue to render ecosystem services that are required for life on earth and as are provided for in Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). The main objective of SDG 15 is to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss and this Goal has seen mixed progress so far. According to the United Nations' 2023 report on the SDG's the global forest area had increased from 31.2% of the total land area in 2000 to 31.8% in 2020, and the rate of deforestation had slowed (United Nations, 2023). Additionally, the proportion of key biodiversity areas covered by protected areas had increased from 44.6% in 2000 to 47.1% in 2022 (United Nations, 2023).

Women who possess the requisite project planning and management skills can play a significant role during the planning stages of any land restoration project. As land owners are key stakeholders in the planning of restoration projects, in certain contexts, the chances that women would be engaged at this level should not be left to chance. It can be a requirement of the responsible agencies, organizations or companies in charge of the restoration project to ensure that equal opportunities are created for equitable representation of women and men in restoration planning committees and technical boards. This is in tandem with SDG 5, Target 5.5 which seeks to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The indicators for measuring performance in this area includes ensuring that an equitable proportion of seats are held by women in national parliaments and local governments, and in managerial positions. This should apply to land restoration planning also.

3.2 Land Restoration Project Implementation

Land Restoration projects are very expensive and involve huge investments running into several thousands of dollars. The process of contracting and vendor selection can be designed to ensure that opportunity is created for women with the requisite entrepreneurial skills and technical skills, to be engaged. There is ample opportunity for women to participate in restoration projects and if utilized, can lead to large scale women economic empowerment. In situations where women are excluded from land ownership by inheritance, they can leverage on land purchase options and with economic empowerment from restoration, they can become land owners through purchase. Economic empowerment increases women's purchasing power and improves their chances for land acquisition amongst other things. In Restoration project implementation, women, besides working for contractors or as contractors, can be actively engaged in the supervision of land restoration projects either as consultants or by direct employment with the restoration implementation agency. The monitoring of land restoration projects involves collecting, analysing and using this information to ascertain if a restoration project is on course and still focused on the objectives specified during the initial planning stages. It also provides an opportunity for the project implementers to review their contractors' methods and make management decisions on what to retain or discard. Women with requisite training can be engaged during monitoring in various capacities. They could be gainfully employed as statisticians, scientists, data analysts, soil engineers, water engineers, geologists, safety officers, caterers amongst a myriad of other skills.

What is key is the opportunity that this creates for economic empowerment in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, Target 5b which promotes the enhancement of the use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. With adequate capacity building in this area, women can be fully engaged in land restoration monitoring. Beyond the direct agricultural benefits, land restoration can also contribute to the economic empowerment of women and youth through the creation of new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The restoration and sustainable management of land resources often require labour-intensive activities, such as planting, weeding, and monitoring, which can provide job opportunities for these marginalized groups (Nkonya et al., 2016). Additionally, the development of value-added products, such as processed agricultural goods or eco-tourism, can further diversify the economic opportunities available to women and youth within the land restoration value chain. Land availability can be enhanced through land restoration.

4 INCREASING LAND AVAILABILITY THROUGH LAND RESTORATION

The completion and handover of restored lands back to local community or to the government by the project implementers, is a crucial milestone in the life of any land restoration project. It presents an opportunity for a fresh start in sustainable land management particularly, equitable access to land. One of the key ways in which land restoration can contribute to greater gender equity in land access and distribution is by enhancing the overall availability and productivity of land. By implementing sustainable land management practices, such as agroecology, conservation agriculture, and ecosystem restoration, the degradation of land can be prevented or even reversed, leading to an increase in the overall availability and quality of land resources

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Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria)

FIG Working Week 2024

Your World, Our World: Resilient Environment and Sustainable Resource Management for all
Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

(FAO, 2018). This can create more opportunities for women to access and utilize land for their agricultural and livelihood activities, ultimately contributing to greater gender equality and food security.

4.1 A Suggested Approach to Land Redistribution

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Goal 5.5, commits to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws. Land restoration presents an new opportunity for reforms and an opportunity to make right the wrongs associated with inequities in land ownership of past generations. This left many women, and in some communities, men also, marginalised and excluded from owning land. Degraded land is of little value and use to both men and women alike, and the likelihood that land restoration will be financed by the original land owners using their personal or collective private financial resources is unlikely. In situations where huge financial interventions may be required, this creates a bargaining ground for governments and their land restoration financiers to dialogue with land owners on possible avenues for mainstreaming land redistribution into the planning and execution of land restoration projects. A suggested approach would include:

1. Stocktaking of the original land owners and/or possibly their descendants to ascertain the primary beneficiaries of a planned restoration process.
2. Disaggregation of the data collected by gender to determine the historical representation of women if any.
3. Development of a proposed land redistribution plan that is gender friendly and sharing that with local community to get their buy-in.
4. Interact with land owners, community and engage stakeholder to secure their consent to land redistribution.
5. Decision-making by the original land owners on the ratio of men to women in the redistribution of restored lands.
6. Ensure that land titling and registration are in place to ensure that all old and new land owners secure proper land titles.

5 CONCLUSION

Land restoration has the potential to play a pivotal role in narrowing the gaps in land access, particularly for women and youth, ultimately contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality. This can be made possible by increasing the overall availability and quality of land resources. An increase in land availability can create new opportunities for women and youth to access and utilize land for their agricultural, livelihood, and entrepreneurial activities. Finally, a key way in which land restoration can contribute to SDG 11 in promoting sustainable cities and communities is by enhancing the sustainability and resilience of urban and peri-urban areas. The degradation of land, driven by factors such as unsustainable urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural practices, can have far-reaching consequences on the overall well-being and liveability of cities and communities (Creutzig et al., 2019). By implementing land restoration initiatives, such as urban

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Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria)

FIG Working Week 2024

Your World, Our World: Resilient Environment and Sustainable Resource Management for all
Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

greening, urban agriculture, and ecosystem-based approaches, the negative impacts of land degradation can be mitigated, leading to improved environmental conditions, increased access to green spaces, and more sustainable resource management.

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Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu (Nigeria)

FIG Working Week 2024

Your World, Our World: Resilient Environment and Sustainable Resource Management for all
Accra, Ghana, 19–24 May 2024

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Iyenemi Ibimina Kakulu is a Professor of Land Management and Valuation of the Rivers State University in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. She is a Senior Expert on Gender and Land with the G20 Global Land Initiative Coordination Office. Prof Kakulu has an academic background in Real Estate appraisal and planning with over thirty-eight years in academia. She is a specialist in value-centric sustainable land use and is widely published. She has been instrumental to the development of postgraduate programmes that address sustainable land management, pro-poor approaches to land use and gender equality issues. Prof Kakulu has held leadership positions within the Nigerian University system, served on different academic and professional governing boards and councils. She is a Senior Expert with the G20 GLI Coordination Office.

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FIG Working Week 2024
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