

PROJECT PROFILE

When Women Do Not Own Land: Land Ownership and Women's Empowerment in Sri Lanka

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About the Project

This project seeks to generate evidence-based research on the relationship between land security and women's empowerment with a view to influencing policy, practice and public awareness in post-war Sri Lanka. There has not been a detailed study of how access to land can enhance women's empowerment since the war ended in 2009. This study was the first of its kind in post-war Sri Lanka. The evidence will be used to influence policy, practice and public awareness of women's empowerment,

locally and globally. As the project developed, additional components have been added to respond to the changing political context. A documentary film, 'Anatomy of a Protest', explores the social protest movement that erupted spontaneously in 2022 in the wake of an unprecedented economic crisis. An article on 'War Memories' was developed, and a second documentary and article on 'Contested Religious Spaces' are in development.

The primary objective of the study is to explore the associations between land

ownership and women's empowerment in Sri Lanka. A mixed methods approach is used for data collection and analysis. The quantitative survey collected primary data from a random sample of 2000 households in Jaffna and Kandy districts. The qualitative research component conducted involved 103 in-depth interviews in four districts – Batticaloa, Jaffna, Kandy, Matara. The districts for the study have been selected purposively to provide insights into the customary laws in place in Sri Lanka..

Key Findings

- **Land ownership does not seem to influence women's labour force participation.** Most women recognise land as an asset that can generate income. Yet, women who own residential property are less likely to be economically active. Moreover, only a few women own agricultural land and even fewer women own land that can be used for non-agricultural economic activities. Agency on land use is more apparent for women in home gardening relative to large-scale cultivation. Even if the land is owned by the women, the men predominantly make decisions related to land use.
- **Legal title to land seems to encourage women's full involvement in household decisions related to land.** Holding a legal title seems to have a positive effect on women's full involvement in land-related decisions. Joint titles particularly seem to make it more likely that women are included in decisions to sell, rent or pass on land to inheritors. However, women are relatively less likely to be included in decisions about pledging land as collateral, and even in decisions related to renting and renovating.
- **Land appears to be more of a status symbol than an economic resource for women.** Land ownership has a positive effect on women mainly through its social value than its value as an economic resource. Many women are also of the opinion that it is difficult to tackle land-related complications without the help of men in addressing this social issue.
- **The type of land women own might play a role in the economic benefits that accrue to them from land ownership.** For some women, residential property might strengthen their bargaining power within the household. Furthermore, productive land ownership could catalyse their participation in economic activities.
- **Land ownership is a necessary but insufficient condition for women's empowerment and social wellbeing in Sri Lanka.** Even if women's land ownership is strengthened, land ownership alone cannot help women transform power relations and overcome gender disparities to achieve agency, empowerment and social wellbeing. In addition to land ownership, knowledge and awareness on how to use this right to one's advantage as bargaining power within the family and community is also needed.



Recommendations

Sri Lankan Government, Development Agencies and Ngos

- **Increase the use of more equitable land ownership arrangements.** Development interventions that involve providing new houses and land (in situations of relocation or resettlement) should focus on encouraging joint titling for potential beneficiaries.
- **There should be a focused discussion on what is required in terms of ensuring land ownership and control of land for women.** Such a consultative process could help identify and strengthen existing laws that are not gender discriminatory and remove certain discriminatory clauses introduced during the colonial period. Further, political interventions in land reform and resettlement processes need to be constrained to ensure that existing laws are fully implemented.
- **The government must improve the economic utility of land to women.** It must also implement a gender sensitive approach across the institutional environment and address barriers to empower women to use land as an economic resource without having to rely too much on male support.
- **Education on one's land rights and awareness of land utilisation must be strengthened.** Women's agency is predominantly seen in home-gardening-related land use, mostly for own consumption, while men have more control over agricultural land use for the market. Therefore, more capacity building for women, raising awareness on agricultural land utilisation, education on women's rights and bargaining power within the household and society need to be adequately provided for land ownership to be truly beneficial to women.

Financial Intermediaries, Especially Banks

- **Formal financial systems must recognise and include women in credit disbursement processes, especially those involving land as collateral.** Revision of their procedures to consider joint consultations with the borrower and their spouse, or the principal female relative, during the loan processing period might be an effective way to promote the inclusion of women in decisions to pledge land as collateral for loans.

Research Organisations and Think Tanks

- **More research and collaborations with women on the ground are required to understand how land ownership can strengthen different aspects of women's empowerment and wellbeing.** A strong context-specific and nuanced understanding of the realities under which women have the potential for agency is necessary to inform and strengthen policies and institutions in relation to land rights.



To learn more about this research project and read its publications visit:
<https://thegenderhub.com/stories/when-women-do-not-own-land-land-ownership-and-womens-empowerment-in-sri-lanka/>

This Project Profile was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to **www.TheGenderHub.com** to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



This research is part of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The Hub is an interdisciplinary, transnational research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations to advance the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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