

## How secure land ownership rights for women affect household food security

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### Executive summary

*In this brief, we show how land ownership rights for women impact household food security. Findings show that female-headed households are worse off than male-headed households in terms of food security. Relatedly, secure land tenure by females significantly improves household food security by enhancing both the Household Dietary Diversity Score and Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning. Therefore, we argue for land tenure reforms for women in Uganda and other countries with similar land tenure systems. Specifically, deliberate efforts are urgently needed to ensure that women have formal ownership of land not only through purchase but also through other possible means like inheritance. Efforts should ensure that women have secure land ownership even after their husbands have died.*

### Introduction

Uganda is grappling with worsening hunger as well as rampant land evictions.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Uganda's Global Hunger Index score was 30.6 (signifying serious hunger) and it ranked 104<sup>th</sup> out of 117 countries (WFP, 2019). The prevalence of severe food insecurity in the total population increased from 17.5% in 2014–2016 to 21.7% in 2018–2020 (FAO et al. 2021). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly worsened food insecurity in several districts in Uganda (Kansiime, et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Uganda is the 15<sup>th</sup> most vulnerable country to climate change and the 38<sup>th</sup> least-ready country. Studies show that vulnerability to food insecurity is consistently higher when households lack secure land tenure.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, land tenure insecurity adversely affects both agricultural production and productivity.<sup>3</sup> This implies that ensuring secure land tenure and property rights improves productivity, which could lead to a reduction in food insecurity and poverty. Therefore, the evictions that have left many poor Ugandans landless, especially the women, are exacerbating food insecurity.

In most households in sub-Saharan Africa, the responsibility of ensuring food security is mainly borne by women. Women are heavily engaged in growing food crops whereas men concentrate on cash crops. Paradoxically, women face higher tenure insecurity than their male counterparts. In addition, as households move from subsistence farming to market-driven farming, there is a shift from woman-led leadership to man-led leadership, as men start to make more agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> This policy brief draws on the critical findings of the working paper *The Gendered Effects of Land Ownership on Household Food Security and Welfare: Empirical Evidence from Uganda* (Mpuuga, Bulime & Ogwang, 2021). This research has taken place under the 50x2030 Initiative of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

<sup>2</sup> The WFP (2019) report shows that vulnerability to food insecurity, especially in rural areas, is higher when households lack secure land tenure.

<sup>3</sup> Landesa (2012) states that increased agricultural productivity and production can enhance household food security and nutrition by increasing their food production for consumption and raising their incomes, allowing them to buy more and better-quality food.

decisions for the household. At the same time, women are commonly excluded from property ownership. Notably, the most prevalent barrier to women’s acquisition of real property is the inheritance that favors male heirs over female ones. Therefore, it is critical to understand how secure land ownership rights for women affect household food security.

## Research approach

We used nationally representative data from the three waves of the Uganda National Panel Survey (2013/14, 2015/16, and 2018/19). First, we compared the mean scores for Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) and Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning between female- and male-headed households. Second, we used a correlated random-effects model to measure the effect of secure land tenure by females on household food security.

## Key findings

**Female-headed households are less food secure than male-headed households.** The literature shows that women are the biggest contributors to household food security because they participate in the growing of food crops, whereas men concentrate on cash crops. It might thus be expected that in female-headed households, food security would not be a problem. Our findings show, however, that female-headed households have a lower Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) and experience fewer Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) than male-headed households (Table 1).

**Table 1: Food Security and Land Acquisition among Female- and Male-Headed Households**

Variable	Female-Headed		Male-Headed		t-test
	Mean (A)	SD	Mean (B)	SD	A – B
Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) [0–12]	7.011	2.475	7.368	2.655	-0.357**
Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) [0–12]	10.595	2.225	11.062	1.775	-0.467***
<i>New Parcel Acquisition (1–4):</i>					
Purchased	0.307	0.462	0.256	0.437	0.050*
Inherited or received as a gift	0.675	0.470	0.725	0.447	-0.050*
Leased in	0.005	0.069	0.002	0.049	0.002
Just walked in (cleared)	0.014	0.118	0.016	0.127	-0.002
Dispute concern over parcel ownership (yes = 1)	0.076	0.265	0.064	0.245	0.011*

Source: Mpuuga, Bulime & Ogwang (2021)

Note: SD = standard deviation. \* = 10%, \*\* = 5%, and \*\*\* = 1% -- level of significance

**Parcel certification is low in Uganda.** Only about 16% of parcels in Uganda have a certificate of title, certificate of customary ownership, or certificate of occupancy (Table 2). This greatly underscores the land ownership insecurity prevailing in the country. This is partly attributed to the prevailing high costs involved in various forms of land certification.

**Table 2: Parcel certification, new parcel acquisition, and dispute concerns**

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	N
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Parcel has a formal certificate (yes = 1)	0.163	0.369	0	1	3,790
<i>New Parcel Acquisition (1–4):</i>					
Purchased	0.295	0.456	0	1	2,833
Inherited or received as a gift	0.694	0.461	0	1	2,833
Leased in	0.003	0.053	0	1	2,833
Just walked in (cleared)	0.008	0.090	0	1	2,833
Dispute concern over parcel ownership (yes = 1)	0.068	0.252	0	1	3,788

Source: Mpuuga, Bulime & Ogwang (2021).

Note: SD = standard deviation. N = number of observations

**Men acquire new parcels through inheritance more often than women do.** About 70% of Ugandans acquire new land through inheritance or gifts, whereas over 29% purchase it with their own money. Close to 1% of Ugandans acquire new land by just walking in and seizing the land as theirs, whereas only 0.3% lease land (Table 2). Notably, male-headed households acquire new parcels through inheritance and gifts more than female-headed households (Table 1). Noteworthy, for women, land ownership is closely tied to marriage, therefore, events like the death of a husband may exacerbate land insecurity for women and consequently worsen food insecurity.

**Female-headed households are more concerned that their land ownership rights might be disputed.** The results show that 7.6% of female-headed households are concerned that someone might come and dispute their land ownership, whereas only 6.4% of male-headed share the same fear (Table 1). This finding underscores the land ownership insecurities women face compared with their male counterparts.

**Possession of a parcel certificate significantly improves household food security.** Empirical findings show that when a female household member has a parcel certificate (either a certificate of title, certificate of customary ownership, or certificate of occupancy), it significantly enhances both measures of household food security. In other words, it has a positive effect on the number of food groups consumed in the household – HDDS. More so, the household enjoys more months of household food provisioning – MAHFP.

## Conclusion

These findings point to the need for land tenure reforms in Uganda, as well as in other sub-Saharan African countries with similar tenure systems. Since women are major contributors to food security—through their engagement in growing food crops—compared with men, who tend to concentrate on cash crops, we argue for more land ownership rights for women.

## Policy Recommendations

**Ensure that women can acquire land not only through purchase but also through other means, like inheritance.** Because girls and women rarely inherit land—and when they do, they often have user rights only—there is a need to go beyond user rights and extend secure ownership rights to women. An act of Parliament could clearly stipulate that females have a right to inherit and fully own land. This step would not only improve household food security but also help the country

achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: achieving gender equality and empowering all women by 2030.

***Issue joint land certificates to both spouses.*** In most areas of Uganda, women rely on conjugal (bridal) co-ownership of land, which applies only as long as the couple stays together and the husband remains alive. In some cases, women lose land ownership rights when their husbands die. The government's issuance of joint land certificates to both spouses could provide a guarantee of secure land ownership to women, even after the death of their husbands.

***Waive or subsidize land certification costs for women.*** After creating a favorable environment for women to inherit land, there is a need to ensure that they formally certify their ownership rights – through either a certificate of title, certificate of customary ownership, or certificate of occupancy. Secure ownership rights for women will eventually promote household adoption of agricultural productivity-enhancing practices such as fertilizer application. Such a change could improve food security, directly feeding into efforts to achieve SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) by 2030.

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