

# Effect on women's land ownership on the gender gap



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7. How and in what ways does women's access to landownership contribute to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment? Please provide examples.

## 1. Introduction

In this modern age of globalization and 'supposed' global prosperity, gender gap continues to persist globally. While there are many factors, such as wage employment, independent income (Anderson and Eshweran, 2009; Ahmed and Jalil, 2018), education (Robeyns, 2003) that affect gender gap, one of the critical factor is ownership and control of property (Agarwal, 1994). According to Agarwal (1994: 1455), "*the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status, and empowerment*".

Most of the redistributive policies of the state led economic development (1910-1970) prescribed land reform policies that were gender blind, leading to creation of significant gender gap in women's ownership and control of land and property, i. e. they were not gender neutral in practice (Razavi, 2009). Such practices perpetuated during the neo-liberal restructuring, where state's role was marginalized and market based solutions were promoted, primarily because the reforms did not take into account the deep rooted patriarchy that manifested itself in the prevailing institutions, social norms and social relations, resulting in systematic negative bias towards and exclusion of women in land ownership (Deere and Leon, 2001). Research based on cross country analysis in the Sub Saharan Africa showed that market based land reform led to further weakening of women's land ownership (Razavi, 2009).

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The present paper, drawing on various literature by feminist economists and others, discusses the various transmission mechanisms through which women's access to land ownership, inferring both legal right and control in line with Agarwal's (1994) argument, affect gender gap in the areas of economic well-being, social status and empowerment. It must be noted that, there are overlaps and interconnectedness among the concepts of economic well-being, social status and empowerment. The paper is divided into the following 4 sections, the first 3 sections illustrate with specific country examples on how and through what mechanisms access to land ownership affects the aforesaid 3 areas respectively.

The final 2 sections will critique and summarize the concepts discussed in the paper.

## **2. Land ownership to Economic Well-being**

Different literature and studies have suggested that access to land ownership is crucial in reducing gender gap, as it can provide a woman with the following benefits, which eventually lead to improved economic well-being: -

1. economic autonomy through independent income on land and assets,
2. strengthened bargaining power by enhancing fall back options and
3. Enhanced security at old age

Ownership and control of land is likely to improve options for women in accessing finance (credit), technical knowledge and assistance, and information (Agarwal, 1994). Woman who owns a land and also has control over the land can have opportunities to use the land as a shelter, utilize the <https://assignbuster.com/effect-on-womens-land-ownership-on-the-gender-gap/>

land to generate income either through lease or by setting up an enterprise (Deere and Leon, 2001). This applies for both single and married women. For married women, land ownership not only enables them to have access to independent income but also to have security in the future at an old age, as in this modern age of neoliberalism, old age benefits are rare and most inheritance laws favour children over widows (Deere and Leon, 2001). One may argue that employment also may generate independent income leading to economic autonomy, however, in most cases such employments are low return, seasonal and informal in nature, thus perpetuating poverty and self-exploitation (Razavi, 2009). As Agarwal (1994) states, "land ownership provides more than employment can, including a stronger base for social and political participation, and so for challenging gender inequality on several other fronts."

Thus, land ownership can provide women with present and future economic autonomy, as such strengthen her economic well-being. Research also shows that there is a relationship between land ownership and marital violence, women land ownership leads to improved economic autonomy and fall-back option in case of separation. This also acts as a strong bargaining position in intra-household conflict and reduces the likelihood of marital violence, thus improving overall well-being.

### **3. Land ownership to Social Status**

Land ownership, irrespective of gender leads to enhanced social status as it may suggest that the person owning the land has strong financial security and higher bargaining power compared to those who doesn't own a property.

Historically, in agrarian societies, such as that in South Asia and Latin

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America, owning a land is crucial and results in enhanced status within the community and society as a whole (Mishra and Sam, 2016). In such societies the land owners are also potential employers who employ labours and workers in their arable lands, giving them a prominent position in the social hierarchy. For women, land ownership not only can bring strong economic well-being as discussed above, but also can strengthen her social status in the community, as Agarwal (1994) strongly suggested that in the South Asian context private rights in land ownership is a privileged position in the society in modern day scenario.

We can see similar pattern in the context of Latin America based on case studies and anecdotal evidence which suggest that, the marriage probability of a peasant women is heightened based on her chances of inheriting land. For instance, in the Northern Peruvian Highlands women who have better chances in inheritance are likely to get married in the same region, compared to women belonging to poorer peasant families with no chance of land inheritance who have to migrate to other regions (Deere and Leon, 2001).

In line with Sen's Capabilities approach (2001), one can argue that improved Social status through land ownership improves the capabilities set of a woman, thereby allowing her to attain functionings which were previously not possible. For instance, becoming politically engaged is much more likely when one is socially privileged. Similarly, absence of such status can limit women's choices and capabilities set (Robeyns, 2003). Enhanced social status gives woman a privileged position in the society which enhances her fall back options and bargaining power.

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#### **4. Land ownership to empowerment**

Feminists define empowerment to be, “ the radical alteration of the processes and structures which reproduce women’s subordinate position as a gender” (Young 1993: 158). However, in the field of development, empowerment is often used as a synonymous term for participation and integration into planning and development activities (Kabeer 1997: 120). In modern day context, empowerment can be well-defined as a process of improving one’s deprived situation by challenging and changing existing power relations that are likely to be dominating or exploitative in the social, economic and political spheres (Agarwal 1994). In recent days, feminist economists have focused their discussions of empowerment on ‘ economic autonomy’ and its relation to the bargaining power of women in the household and beyond; while the degree of bargaining power is mostly influenced by the strength of the women’s fall- back options (Deere and Leon, 2001), which in turn is strengthened by land ownership (Agarwal 1994). As can be seen form the research in Kerala, India, where it was found that- about 84% women were victims of psychological violence and 49% of physical violence, whereas for women who owned property the numbers were 16% and 7% respectively (Pradeep and Agarwal, 2005).

#### **5. Critique**

Women land ownership certainly has a positive impact on reducing gender gap in economic well-being and other areas. However, the management of land redistribution and ownership are equally important. Taking a simplistic view that access to land is the ‘ magic bullet’ or panacea that can solve rural women’s problem is unrealistic (King and Mason, 2001). For instance, market

based land reforms are unlikely to be inclusive for low income poor marginalized women, as they do not have the economic resource to participate in such markets in the first place (Razavi, 2009). Similarly focus on decentralization and leaving land reform to ‘community institutions’ (e.g. village councils, ‘traditional’ authorities, or ‘indigenous’ institutions) may also have negative consequences as they are likely to be corrupt, have under-representation of women and due to entrenched patriarchy be bias against them (Tsikata, 2003). Finally, state-led demand driven land reform may “*commit the state to respond to applications from social groups that are already constituted, in which it is likely that women’s role will be a marginal and dependent one*” (Razavi, 2009). Thus it is important to understand that land ownership can emancipate women but it equally important to focus on the mechanism through which such effort can be implemented.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

The present paper showed the prevailing situation where there is a persistent gap in land ownership across developing world. Following this, based on review of literature, the paper tried to show how reduced gender gap in land ownership can lead to improved (reduce gap) in economic well-being, social status and empowerment, particularly through strengthening of women’s bargaining power and fall-back position within the household and beyond . The paper also suggested not taking a simplistic view about land ownership and stressed on the importance of the process, through which landownership among women can be improved.

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