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GIRLS AND LAND

A BRIEFER ON LANDESA'S *GIRLS PROJECT* IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

WHY LAND?

Land is a multi-issue building block

Across most of the developing world, a family or individual's standard of living is largely determined by whether they have secure rights to land and related resources. Land rights shape a person's social status, political power, decision-making within the community, and access to economic opportunity. Often, land rights lay the foundation for other development investments to take root, like education programs, financial services, and health care.^{1, 2}

WHY LAND AND GIRLS?

Good things happen when women have secure land rights...

It is not enough that men alone possess land rights. To realize their full, transformative potential, women too must hold these rights.

Research shows benefits across development areas – including gender equality and women's empowerment, nutrition and food security, reduction of disease and violence, education, and environmental sustainability – when women have secure rights to land and related assets and resources. Such rights can lead to access to capital and productive markets and can reduce women's vulnerability in old age or in the event of divorce, abandonment by a spouse, or the death of a spouse.^{3, 4}

... But barriers begin early in life

Obstacles between women and these land-related benefits often begin early in life. As such, it is important to reach them as girls.

In India, girls and women are responsible for much of the labor on land, and the law allows women to access, own, and inherit land. But in practice, a number of factors often deny women these rights. Even before they are women, girls are not well-positioned to realize their land rights. In India, early-life obstacles include:

- **Lack of knowledge:** Generally, girls in India are unaware of what their land rights are, the institutions and processes that are key to realizing them, and the elements and benefits of having land rights.
- **Common practices and biases:** Common practices and biases make girls unlikely candidates for inheriting land. Such assets are usually marked for male heirs, as parents wish to retain property within the family, and a girl is expected to move away to her husband's home after marriage. Families also pay dowry when their daughters are married, the cost of which is a significant burden for poor families. It is usually understood that when a girl takes dowry to her husband's home, she does not deserve further family resources or assets such as land, even though she has a legal right to inherit family land, and the dowry is rarely an asset for her own possession or use.

LANDESA'S INNOVATIONS WITH GIRLS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Landesa's *Girls Project* seizes upon an opportunity to help adolescent girls to build knowledge and establish a foundation of empowerment that can stay with them throughout adulthood. The objective is to position girls in rural West Bengal, India, to claim their land rights when they are women, and in doing so, to also empower them in the near term as adolescents. Core features of the project include:

- **A government partnership and scaled model:** Landesa has partnered with the Government of West Bengal, India, to integrate land issues into a state-run girls' empowerment program. The program, which targets roughly 900,000 girls and relies upon government-funded, village-level community workers, broadly aims to provide girls with life and vocational skills and to



Girls Project participants Sushmita, 14, and friend

improve nutritional and educational outcomes. With Landesa's support, the program has incorporated issues of land and inheritance rights, asset-creation, and land-based livelihood skills.

- **Knowledge, mindset, and empowerment:** The project is designed to address knowledge of girls' and women's land rights; mindsets around land rights (i.e., even if parents know that the law supports it, do they believe a daughter should inherit land?); and a sense of empowerment (i.e., does a girl feel able to exercise her inheritance rights, and do parents feel able to make decisions about inheritance, dowry, marriage, and other issues that contradict community norms?).
- **Multi-stakeholder approach:** The project engages not only girls, but other stakeholders who affect their lives. The government-sponsored girls' empowerment program runs primarily through village-level "girls' groups," through which community workers conduct a series of "learning games" with the girls. While the program is focused primarily on girls, Landesa has added components that engage other critical stakeholders (boys, communities, and local government institutions) on topics including land rights and the links between land, early marriage, dowry and education. Activities include sensitization and awareness-raising efforts with boys at schools; community meetings; and discussions with local government bodies.
- **Findings:** Landesa has not yet captured final findings for its government-partnered work in West Bengal. However, the following change story illustrates what is ideally possible when the right systems, support, and activities are in place.

“

I had to discontinue my studies after I passed class IV. My parents could not support my education because of abject poverty and I had to support my mother in household work and taking care of my brother and sister. Since then I have been staying at home and supporting my mother to run the family. My younger brothers and sisters are grown up and they are now going to school. Fortunately the financial position of my family improved a little now.

For the last year, my parents have been planning for my marriage. I don't want to get married so early, but could not oppose my parents' decision, as I had no justification for that. I could not even request them to delay my marriage because of my education.

Since I joined the [girls' group], I have learned so many things, especially the process of developing and nurturing a kitchen garden. Now I have developed a kitchen garden in my family land and grown various seasonal vegetables. Vegetables from my kitchen garden ensure a supply of fresh vegetables for daily diet. I sold extra produce from the garden in the local market. This helped me to earn some money. Now my parents are convinced that I also can do something by myself and can contribute to family income. They have changed their decision and will delay my marriage for a few years. I am really happy now! ”

Mamata, 16

LANDESA'S HISTORY

Landesa is an international non-governmental organization based in Seattle that fights poverty and provides opportunity & security for poor rural women and men through the power of land rights. Insecure land rights are a leading factor in extreme poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality, conflict, environmental destruction, and sluggish economic growth. Additionally, more than one billion poor rural people around the world lack legal rights to the land on which they depend to survive.

Landesa has partnered with governments and civil society to develop pro-poor and gender-sensitive laws, policies & programs to help secure land rights for 120+ million families in more than 50 countries over 50 years. Landesa currently has active projects in India, Myanmar, China, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique.

¹ Landesa, "Women's Secure Rights to Land: Benefits, Barriers, and Best Practices," issue brief, 2012, available at <https://s24756.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Landesa-Women-and-Land-Issue-Brief.pdf>

² Landesa, "A Better Tomorrow," infographic (along with its cited sources), available at <https://www.landesa.org/resources/land-rights-matter/>

³ Landesa, "A Better World," infographic, available at <http://www.landesa.org/wp-content/uploads/Womens-Land-Rights-Infographic-Landesa-11-14.pdf>

⁴ Landesa, "Women's Secure Rights to Land: Benefits, Barriers, and Best Practices," issue brief, 2012, available at <https://s24756.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Landesa-Women-and-Land-Issue-Brief.pdf>

A BETTER TOMORROW

SECURE LAND RIGHTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR THE WORLD'S POOREST FAMILIES

Agricultural production
increased by 60%¹



Annual family income
increased by 150%⁴



Investment in property
improvements **doubled**²



High school graduation
rates **doubled**⁵



Number of hours worked
increased by 17%³



Teen pregnancy
reduced by half⁶



Evidence is growing. Results vary by context.

1. C. Chen, Land Reform in Taiwan (1961), p. 84, chart 12.

2. K. Deininger, Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction (2003), p. 46.

3. E. Field, "Property Rights and Household Time Allocation in Urban Squatter Communities: Evidence from Peru" (2003).

4. C. Chen, Land Reform in Taiwan (1961), p. 84, chart 12. See also F. Gershon and A. Nishio, The Benefits of Land Registration and Titling: Economic and Social Perspectives (1999) (finding a 200% increase in income).

5. S. Galini and E. Shargrodsky, "Property Rights for the Poor: Effects of Land Titling," 94 *Journal of Public Economics* 700 (2010).

6. S. Galini and E. Shargrodsky, "Effects of Land Titling on Child Health," 2 *Economic and Human Biology* 353 (2004), p. 367.

A BETTER WORLD

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

PROSPEROUS

Women with strong property and inheritance rights earn up to **3.8 times more income**



NOURISHED

Children whose mothers own land are up to **33% less likely to be severely underweight**



EDUCATED

Families where women own more land devote **more of their budget to education**



SAFER

Women who own land are up to **8 times less likely to experience domestic violence**



RESILIENT

Where women's property and inheritance rights are stronger, women's **individual savings are up to 35 percent greater**



HEALTHY

Children in households where women own land are up to **10% less likely to be sick**



PROSPEROUS and RESILIENT data points: Peterman, A. (2011). Women's Property Rights and Gendered Policies: Implications for Women's Long-term Welfare in Rural Tanzania. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 47(1), 1-30.

EDUCATED data point: Doss, C. (2006). The effects of intrahousehold property ownership on expenditure patterns in Ghana. *Journal of African Economies*, 15(1), 149-180.

NOURISHED data point: Allendorf, K. (2007). Do Women's Land Rights Promote Empowerment and Child Health in Nepal?. *World Development*, 35(11), 1975-1988. Chicago

SAFER data point: Agarwal, B., & Panda, P. (2007). India. Toward freedom from domestic violence: the neglected obvious. *Journal of Human Development*, 8(3), 359-388.

HEALTHY data point: Menon, N., van der Meulen Rodgers, Y., & Nguyen, H. (2014). Women's Land Rights and Children's Human Capital in Vietnam. *World Development*, 54, 18-31.