



Capturing Impact

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NexThought Monday: Land Rights for Women - a Ripple Effect

By Deborah Espinosa

People often question Landesa's emphasis on women's land rights in our work, from China and India to Rwanda and Kenya.

Why do women need secure rights to land if their husbands already have such rights? Do we have something against men or male farmers? Do we think women are better farmers?

All good questions. For good answers, meet Rwandan farmer and father of five children, Jean Habumukiza. Jean and his wife grow corn and sweet potatoes on a few tiny plots of land in far northern Rwanda, in the lush foothills near Volcanos National Park.

From 2002 through 2009, Landesa partnered with the Rwandan government to help ensure that Rwandans would have secure rights to land and receive land titles. In this case, both husbands and wives' names were included on titles and communities – both men and women again – learned about the process for and significance of getting a land title.



A Rwandan woman secures a title
(Image credit: Landesa/Deborah)

On my recent visit, Habumukiza shared how his family's life has changed since they received title to the

- They started using fertilizer and tripled their yield of corn.
- They used the land title to obtain a loan from the bank, which they used to pay to connect their home to the power grid.
- They no longer have to waste money in the court system to defend the property from opportunistic neighbors a few feet of their patch of land; a regular occurrence in the days before they had titles.
- Their children (ages 8 to 21) have better prospects now that they can complete their homework at night (thanks to electricity) and will be able to pay school fees (thanks to the bumper harvest).

But there is another impact he highlighted emphatically during our talk:

"I feel secure and my wife feels secure too, because the women never used to have land. But now my wife and I own 50 percent," explained Habumukiza. "I am not worried, now. Even if I die, my wife and child will own the land. Because they are also written on the land title."

Many developing countries, from Liberia to India, are rife with women without land rights, who upon their husbands are thrown off of their land and left with no way to support themselves or their children. Na continue to suffer from the effects of these children robbed of an education and a future.

“Life has changed for my family, “ said Habumukiza. “Previously, my wife had no claim to the land. But percent share and I think our relationship is better, because everyone has a say on the land.”

Now, says Habumukiza, they make decisions together. And he and his neighbors told me that because two people, they are more informed and less impulsive – often that means he and his wife make better

So for Habumukiza, women’s land rights is a practical matter. For him, it’s not about ideals of equality; women’s liberation. It simply is what will help his family in the short- and long-term.

Of course, the ideals of equality and women’s liberation are laudable and reason enough to support the land rights. But in interview after interview with Habumukiza’s neighbors, I found that the poor often had a different set of reasons – mostly based on practicalities – for supporting women’s right to land.

His neighbors like, Fabien Ngendahimana, father of eight, echo this perspective.

“Before, it was easy for a man to go to the bank and sell off his land without his wife even knowing,” said. “But now life has changed. But now even the crops we plant on the land my wife and I agree on. Previously things were dishonest. Before we wasted our money and wasted our land.”

Without prompting, these men challenge those who see women’s rights as a zero sum game, those who think that women get stronger makes men weaker, that supporting women farmers undermines male farmers, that a luxury that the poor cannot afford. Instead, the Rwandan men with whom I spoke in this far northern country explained that women’s land rights are something they and their families simply can no longer do without it.

Deborah Espinosa is senior attorney, land specialist, and photographer for [Landesa](#), an organization that helps governments to provide land rights for the world’s poor. Follow Landesa on Twitter [@Landesa_Global](#)

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