

Why is gender important?

◎ Why is gender equity an issue today?

Recent changes have sometimes increased inequities in regard to access to land. Factors include:

- ◎ Political and legal structures may have created conflicts between customary practices and formal law with respect to women's land rights.
- ◎ An increasing number of households are now headed by women due to migratory labour, divorce, illness, desertion, war and violent conflict. Traditional land tenure systems may not recognize their rights or the women may not be able to afford legal options to resolve disputes. Unequal inheritance rules may prevent women from having the resources to take advantage of opportunities.
- ◎ Women in formal, religious or customary marriages may not have official documentation of their marital status. As a result they may be excluded from development projects.
- ◎ Better education for rural women and men is leading to career opportunities that often require financing. Credit is becoming increasingly important to build a house, start a business, or obtain farm inputs. Without clear, documented land rights, people cannot access credit. Women are less likely to have their rights formally recognised.
- ◎ Women are less likely to invest in their fields if they might be evicted at any time. ■



◎ Gender equity and social development

Good governance depends on recognizing all stakeholders and respecting their rights. Therefore gender equity is an increasingly important international and national issue.

Gender equity in rights to land can increase women's power in social and political relationships. Providing secure rights to land for women can increase their social and political status, and improve their sense of self-esteem, confidence, security and dignity. Land rights often lead to other benefits in society including participation in community decision-making, elections, and other socio-economic activities. Without gender equity in land, 50 percent or more of rural stakeholders may not have an effective voice in national or community governance, and may be excluded from development projects.

Having rights to land may help to empower women in their negotiations with other household members, and with the community and society at large. ■



◎ Gender equity and economic development

Improving the situation of women as well as men is necessary for sustainable rural development. Almost all countries in the world have ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. One specific provision is that rural women should have the right:

to have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes.

The rights to land that women have are often not documented but are informal. Without documentation, they do not have equal access to credit or facilities. Care must be taken to ensure that their rights are not misinterpreted, forgotten, or erased in land projects.

Efficient production is difficult when those who have responsibility for using the land have limited rights to control it. This is often the case in female-headed households where the rights of women do not have formal recognition, yet these women may be the sole provider of food for their dependents. Today, many farm operations require external financing and access to credit is a potential benefit of formalizing land rights. But if women's rights are not formally recognised, women must continue to depend on having access to credit through male family members. Thus even if women are the primary land user and household head, they may not be able to use their land to the greatest benefit. ■