

# **Rural Women's Relations to Land Resources in KwaZulu-Natal: Issues of Access and Control**

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## **Introduction**

Gender, socially constructed relationships between men and women, is a critically important concept that shapes the experiences of specific groups in society as well as the distribution and access of resources among these groups. The question of who gets access to and controls land resources is often highly political and gendered. In rural Africa, studies have shown that access to land resources is critical to food production as well as household stability and continuity. The majority of the rural poor in South Africa are women and children. Additionally, a significant proportion of rural households are headed by females.

This article provides a gendered analysis of African rural women's relations to the environment, drawing from fieldwork conducted in rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The primary concern of this article is on women and land. This includes aspects of land rights and land use practices as well as an interest in environmental resources. The focus is thus not on land *per se* but the aspects of land that are potentially useful to household and communities such as water, place for shelter, land quality, wood, wild foods, gardens and medicinal plants. In particular, the gendered use of land resources, the ways in which limited and restricted access to natural resources and environmental degradation impacts women's lives as well as women's responses to these problems are highlighted. Some of the concerns are whether development initiatives in South Africa consider and

are able to positively impact the multiple facets of rural women's relationship to the land. An additional consideration is whether existing policies and practices in South Africa challenge social, political and economic disparities that tend to reinforce women's inability to own, access and control resources more generally.

It is important to point out that the primary concern of this article is women and land in the context of widespread and persistent patriarchy in South Africa's rural areas. It is acknowledged that other historical forces such as colonialism and apartheid has played a central role in denying women access to and use of land resources. These processes often reinforced patriarchy at the local level.

A multi-conceptual framework coalesces several themes relating to women's access to and control of environmental resources, including historical dimensions, distributional concerns and culturally-based patriarchal tendencies. Real and long-lasting improvements in women's social, political and economic well-being are directly linked to them having control of and access to land resources such as forests and water. It is essential therefore to understand and critically examine rural women's relations to the land as well as reverse trends that tend to disadvantage and marginalise women. This is critical for women's empowerment and successful rural development more generally.

Rural development strategies that focus on women and environmental linkages are investments in future generations and the welfare of rural areas. The majority of South African women and children reside in rural areas. This also applies to the African continent more broadly where the majority of African women in rural areas are often impoverished and constitute an important source of latent productive potential (Beneria 1992; Claassens 2007; Hoff & Hodne 1994; Wieringa 1994). Cross and Hornby (2002:34) state that in South Africa women heads of households had fewer and smaller plots of land than male heads. Additionally, they were less likely than men to use their land for crop production.

The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) (2006:1) states that women own less than 15% of land worldwide and that 'without official title to land and property, women have fewer economic options and virtually no collateral for obtaining loans and credits'. Land and the environment have both economic and social meaning in rural areas. Davison

(1988:3) highlights that despite the symbolic association between women and land and the widespread cultural perception of Earth as 'mother', women only own less than one percent of the world's land. In the last two decades this figure has not changed significantly. South Africa is no exception in this regard. Thus, women have unequal access to land and the environment which impedes development and harms women's wellbeing.

Land and environmental resources more generally are vital rural assets; they diversify rural livelihood options and provide a sense of security in contexts where formal employment opportunities are limited (Bonti-Ankomah 1997:5). The environment and land in particular have both economic and symbolic meaning. As a result, real and long-lasting improvement in women's social, economic and political well-being is directly linked to them having access to and control of more and better quality environmental resources (Agarwal 1996; 1997). Gladwin (2002:1) states that soil fertility is the number one natural resource in Africa and soil quality is generally declining with devastating consequences for poor people generally but rural women in particular.

For most rural African women in South Africa the lack of legitimate access and rights to land and other natural resources are significant. Ahonsi (1995:88) states:

... apart from the fact that women make up more than half of the adult population of Africa, they play critically important multiple roles in economic production, social reproduction and the exploitation and management of local natural resources. But they as a group, remain socially subordinated to men and benefit less from the fruits of economic production.

Many studies indicate that women are overwhelmingly responsible for housework and other reproductive responsibilities (Momsen & Kinnaird 1993; Ostergaard 1992; Parpart 1989). Furthermore, women's household labour, reproductive and nurturing responsibilities are often provided on an unpaid basis. Water and wood, for example, are collected generally by women. Domestic labour also contributes significantly to surplus value. Kalabamu (2004:1) states:

Although women in most parts of southern Africa have traditionally been responsible for growing food crops and, in some communities, building houses, they never owned the land on which they carried out these activities.

Kalabamu (2005:1) further argues that while women were largely excluded from land ownership during the pre-colonial era, patriarchy has since been selective on the type and nature of land rights that women may enjoy.

It is important to recognise from the outset that the relations between rural women and land resources are influenced by specific historical, socio-economic and physical environments under consideration, and are location-specific. It varies with, for example, whether one is focusing on landless rural women in the former homelands, female farm workers or women who own land independently. The nature of women's activities and their varied relationships to land differ significantly across these contexts. Furthermore, the availability and uses of land resources are also influenced by diverse situations. For the purposes of this article, we are mainly concerned with African women in historically disadvantaged rural communities in South Africa.

This article draws from secondary sources as well as primary research conducted in three rural communities in Kwazulu-Natal province, South Africa: Ekuthuleni, Baynesfield and Boiling Fountain. Ekuthuleni and Baynesfield are in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality while Boiling Fountain straddles both the uMgungundlovu and Umzinyathi District Municipalities. An in-depth interview schedule was used to interview 20 women from each of the communities. Additionally, focus group exercises incorporating various participatory methodologies including mental mapping, ranking exercises, gender activities' profiles and Venn diagrams were used. The focus groups comprised of 8-10 women who were interviewed at each of the case study sites. The women were selected purposively to ensure a cross-section of interests, needs and socio-economic experiences. This study incorporates some of the pertinent findings of the research in relation to the issues under investigation.

This article is divided into six sections. The first section provides some conceptual clarifications pertaining to women and land relations. The next two sections critically assess African women's multiple relations to

land resources as well as their control of and access to environmental resources, especially land. The fourth section underscores the importance of land and environmental resources for rural women. The fifth section looks at African rural women and access to communal resources. Finally, concluding remarks are forwarded.

### **Women and Land Relations: Some Conceptual Clarifications**

Gender, property relations, and land need to be conceptually linked. Gender relations to land are rooted in patriarchal systems. Kalabamu (2005:2) asserts that in contemporary academic discourses patriarchy is conceived as a concept for analysing power and kin relationships among men and women in society. The exercise of power is central to the definition of patriarchy:

... power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the kind of choices people make ... (and which) derive from a 'deeper' level of reality, one which is not evident in daily life because it is inscribed in the taken-for-granted rules, norms and customs within which everyday life is conducted (Kabeer 1999:441 cited in Kalabamu 2005:2).

The connections between gender and property need to consider not only the distribution of property in terms of ownership but who controls it, that is, power dynamics in relation to decision-making and use. This is important in both private and communal property systems. Many studies indicate that gender equality in legal rights to own property does not guarantee gender equality in actual ownership or control (Agarwal 1996; Payne 2004; Rao 2005; Tripp 2004). There is a need to distinguish between legal and social recognition of land rights, and between recognition and enforcement. Also, the distinction between the ownership of land and effective control is important. du Guerny (1997:14) argues that land arrangements can be divided up into physical and rights-based characteristics. Physical characteristics refer to the size and degree of fragmentation, location and quality of the land holding. Rights-based characteristics refer to the rights, security, conditionality and legal status that are conferred on an individual or collective piece of land.

There are different types of rights to land including use, ownership and control. Land resources include the land itself that can be used for cultivation or grazing purposes, as well as forests for foraging, medicinal plants, fuelwood and building materials, natural water sources that include surface water and ground water that can be used for domestic and irrigation purposes, and minerals in the land such as gold. Land can also be used for farming, for residential purposes, for investment, to enhance social status and/or as a source of security. It is clear that access to land and related natural resources is critical to strengthen rural livelihood options and strategies, especially for women who are involved in cultivation, collecting water or fuel, building/ construction, etc. Access to land can be through ownership and use. It can also be through informal concessions granted by individuals to kin or to friends. There are numerous ways that women can have access to land that does not necessarily confer rights to land. Control on the other hand implies the ability to decide how land is used, how its produce is disposed of, whether it can be leased out, mortgaged, bequeathed or sold. In this regard, rights vested in individuals and rights vested in groups need to be separated. The importance of control is stressed by Gasson (1988: 302) who states: 'What women *do* is important but what women *control* is crucial'. Ownership exists when the owner of the land has a title deed specifying a particular parcel of land. Although ownership legally confers to the deed holder property rights, it is possible that actual control over the parcel of land might be in the hands of someone else. For example, an elderly widow might own the land on paper but her adult son makes the decisions pertaining to the management and use of the parcel of land.

### **African Women's Multiple Relationships with the Rural Environments in which they Live**

Agricultural production and food production are increasingly becoming female activities and responsibilities. In some cases women are important agricultural producers of both cash and subsistence crops. Many studies have illustrated that in most cases agricultural activities are highly gendered (Agarwal 1997; Momsen & Kinnaird 1993; Parpart 1989). Women are generally responsible for maintaining food gardens and looking after small animals such as poultry and pigs. In many developing countries women are

the principal producers of food. The majority of women in these areas are immersed in multiple agricultural activities including land preparation, planting, weeding, harvesting, and caring for animals (especially smaller livestock such as poultry and goats). Gladwin (2002:1) specifically asserts that African women on small rain-fed farms produce up to 70-80% of the domestic food supply in most sub-Saharan African societies and also provide 46% of the agricultural labour. The cultivation of crops, especially mixed crops, is more labour-intensive than raising cattle which is generally viewed as male responsibility. Women are also responsible for post-harvest activities such as transportation, food storage, food processing and waste management. Women's involvement in agriculture varies by region of the world, ethnicity and class. Although official statistics are unreliable as a guide to women's participation in agriculture, there are indications that agribusiness has responded to the economic crisis by reducing costs through the feminisation and casualisation of labour (Agarwal 1997; Carney 1993). Family farms and businesses also survive by intensifying female labour.

A key debate in terms of sustainable environmental practices is related to population control. Concern is whether rapid population growth and pressure exacerbates the exploitation of resources beyond the point of sustainability. The North advocates population control in the South while the South argues that environmental problems are attributed to the wealth and lifestyles of the North. Ahonsi (1995:85), writing about gender relations in Africa, suggests that one significant consequence of the continuing relative landlessness of women, especially in patrilineal settings has been women's lack of security. To minimise the risk of divorce or desertion and enhance their old age security, women in such situations tend to have many children in order to have at least one son through whom family security is assured. Thus, poverty-alleviation programmes aimed at reducing rural population growth and family size is threatened in part by women being unable to access and control land. It is therefore questionable whether interventions to control population growth can reduce environmental degradation. Poor families may want more children to diversify incomes as a risk reducing mechanism. On the other hand, the difficulties of maintaining large families could lead to a reduction in family size. Joeke *et al.* (1994:137) stress that most environmental damage has nothing to do with population pressure, but is related to inappropriately specified resource access and use arrangements.

It is also possible that land in women's hands will lead to a different and more environmentally sound use of resources. The Chipko movement, discussed by Agarwal (1996), in India illustrates this issue. The movement was aimed at protecting and regenerating the forests. In the tree planting schemes men preferred fruit trees for cash while women opted for fuel and fodder trees for subsistence. Also, women successfully resisted the axing of oak trees for a government scheme to set up a potato farm. The village men supported the government because of the potential cash benefits.

These women's direct concern with the protection and regeneration of the forest as a source of 'fuel, fodder, food, fibre, and fertilizer' and of 'soil, water, and pure air', has had significant positive implications for the ecological preservation of the region (Agarwal 1996:37).

Agarwal (1996:37) warns, however, that women's concern with environmental protection needs to be viewed in connection with the prevailing gender division of labour and not in some biological affinity with women and nature.

It is also clear that what is necessarily better for the environment may not be necessarily better for women (Jiggins 1994). A case in point is that more labour intensive crops and mixed cropping systems are often advocated as more environmentally sound practices. Yet, this ultimately increases women's workloads. Thus, it is imperative that women's needs and environmental sustainability be integrated to ensure that the new fetishism with environmental sustainability in poor rural areas does not leave women further disadvantaged as do many other development programmes. This point does not detract from the need to develop policies to pursue more ecologically appropriate and productive farming practices.

Results from the primary research conducted show that although the women exhibited a wealth of indigenous knowledge about their environment (such as knowledge of specific species including edible and medicinal plants and animals, vulnerable areas that are prone to erosion and methods of conserving wildlife), many practices mitigate against sustainable environmental usage. This can directly be attributed to the poverty levels of the communities and their lack of access to sufficient natural resources. A



case in point is that although respondents claimed not to harvest live wood, there was plenty of visible evidence to the contrary.

### **Women's Control of and Access to Environmental Resources, Especially Land**

Payne (2004:170) argues that gender is a key issue in tenure policy and in many countries women do not enjoy equal rights to own or inherit land or property. Claassens (2007:1) asserts that unequal property relations have had far reaching and serious consequences for women. For example, Davison's (1988) study shows that better off women generally have access to more and better quality land than the wives of peasants. Although African patterns of landholding historically were inclusive, nonetheless, the amount and quality of land acquired or inherited depended upon an individual's status and position in a family, lineage or community (Davison 1988:3). Women's access to land is often dependent upon their relationship to men and their marital status. Moreover, the first wife in polygamous households had greater access to land than co-wives. Wives are often given access to land while unmarried women who are prevented from inheriting land in patrilineal societies have little access to land. They must depend upon fathers or brothers to provide them with land or seek wage work elsewhere. In most of Africa, inheritance patterns favour male-to-male patterns, with surviving sons usually inheriting their father's land. Ezumah and Domenico's (1995) study in Nigeria illustrates that women are precluded from inheriting land as a measure to ensure that family land is not dispersed. Yanou (2006:61) argues that the restriction of the Black woman's capacity to access land in South Africa falls within a wider context of the tendency that regards women as unequal to men, specifically the prevalent practice in communal areas to enthrone the male head of household as the only true person and holder of family property. Hansen *et al.* (2005:115) state that generally inheritance patterns are important aspects of tenure that influence how individuals acquire land and related resources such as trees.

Women are therefore generally dependent on men for their access to environmental resources. The control that women exercise over the land on which they produce much of the food remains tenuous, even in matrilineal societies. Inheritance laws make it difficult for women to own their own

land. Ezumah and Domenico's (1995) case study in rural Malawi shows that when husbands died the household property was expropriated from the wives by the respective husbands' families although the wives played a major role in contributing to production. Sharp and Spiegel's (1990) research in South Africa demonstrates that women in households without land often yearn for independence from men, citing the fact that their men are not faithful and are often violent. Women married to men with land sometimes suffer from similar abuse but are often reluctant to leave their husbands. The importance of land, even when accessed indirectly, is crucial for women. Female-headed households in particular are generally economically insecure. Most female-headed households find it difficult to farm since they lack equal access to the means of agricultural production such as land and cattle. Claassens (2007:2) illustrates women's reliance on men in South Africa to access land resources and warns against joint vesting of land rights:

Much of the lobbying for women's land rights in Africa has focused on joint vesting of ownership between husband and wife as the primary 'solution' to the problems faced by rural women. However, this may not be a sufficient solution for a range of women (in particular for the increasing numbers of women who do not marry) and may, in fact, backfire on single women's living on family land.

Primary research conducted in Kwazulu-Natal illustrates numerous ways in which women are negatively impacted by the gender bias in resource allocation and control. Women's working days lengthen with the depletion and reduced access to forests, water and land. Extra time devoted to gathering reduces time available for crop production and can adversely impact crop incomes especially in communities where due to male migration women are the main cultivators. Women are more directly exposed than men to water-borne diseases. Population displacements result in a disruption of support networks. Gathering of food and medicinal items help them to acquire knowledge about their environment. Thus, limiting access to environmental resources and redistributing low quality land reduce this learning environment. This in turn will undermine the ability of poor households to deal with subsistence crises.

The mental maps compiled by groups of women in each locality under study represent women's perceptions about resource use and control in the community and the household. From the maps, the landscape can be seen as one of gendered conflict, complementarity and cooperation. The control of most land, except for the garden plots, is vested primarily in men. However, labour inputs and responsibility is subdivided between men and women in different contexts. The perception of control is extremely complex. In most of the group exercises women indicated that they shared control. But when asked who decides about what crop is grown or how monies accrued is spent, they stated that it was usually men. Thus, participation may be confused with control.

Men often control meanings attached to property and gender constructs. The private property doctrine that is a fundamental component of capitalism, reduces the earth to a commodity that can be bought and sold. Women, in a patriarchal system, are also viewed as men's property. Both women and land are thus viewed as objects that can be manipulated and controlled. The exploitation of the natural resource base and the exploitation of women are linked.

Blaikie (1989:41) suggests that understanding the political economy of the environment and social change will lead to a greater comprehension of differential gender access to and control over land, livestock, labour and decision-making at the household level. It is at this level that the 'simple reproduction squeeze' (Bernstein 1979:427) is most acutely felt. In African rural areas, women are dramatically and negatively impacted by this process. Carney (1993:329) also shows that as relations of production change and the means of production becomes increasingly scarce, the household comes under economic stress and becomes a more deeply contested terrain. One result, as women strive to meet household responsibilities, is to increase pressure on the land. Blaikie (1989:428) indicates that under these circumstances, the continuous undermining of the resource base results in a cycle of environmental decay that increases rapidly the reproduction costs of the household. Women tend to bear the brunt of this process in the short term as well as the long term as the sustainability of the resource base is threatened. Cross and Horny (2002:28) illustrate that the opportunities and obstacles to women's access to land are inextricably tied to a web of traditional social values, attitudes and stereotypes in communities; the

traditional institutions that support and enforce these values; and the policies, legislation and particular implementation strategies and practices of government-led land reform programmes.

In the case of South Africa, government has embarked on a comprehensive land reform programme. One of the main objectives of land reform is to prioritise historically marginalised groups, such as women, in the provision of land. Some of the main legislative aspects of land reform includes the Land Reform Act 3 of 1996, where labour tenants are provided with grants to purchase land; the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act (IPILRA) (1996) which was intended as an interim measure to prevent changes in land access or tenure rights (in former 'homelands') that may be driven by rural elites attempting to unjustly benefit from any possible confusion as a result of imminent land reform changes; the Communal Property Association Act, 28 of 1996 which creates a legal mechanism enabling a group of people to purchase and hold land collectively; the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA), 62 of 1997, whose objective is to help people to obtain stronger rights to land they live on, and to land which is situated nearby; the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act, 19 of 1998 which seeks to improve the rights of tenants by prohibiting the unlawful evictions; and the Communal Land Right Act 11 of 2004 which gives the Minister of Land Affairs the powers to transfer ownership of communal land to communities to be held under the new order rights. Additionally, the publication of the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) policy promulgated in November 2000 has signalled a shift in centralising agricultural development in land redistribution efforts in rural areas. The key objectives of the LRAD are to stimulate growth from agriculture, improve nutrition and incomes, empower young people and women, and de-congest former homelands. The Acts and policies specifically highlight the importance of addressing women's land needs and rights in the context of redressing gender inequalities. However, several challenges arise in terms of addressing traditional patriarchal practices that generally view women as subordinates. It is for this reason that while several laudable policies and legislation are in place and intentions to address gender inequalities are articulated, the key challenges experienced are to translate these into practice.

Resource	Access	Control	Comments
Land	M/F	M	Women tend to have access to less land. Government land registration or titling system tends to reinforce male power.
Labour	M/F	M/F	Generally, men control and access household labour, especially for agricultural production. Women, however, tend to rely on daughters for labour for child rearing, subsistence production and domestic chores.
Water, wild foods, wood and medicinal plants	M/F	M	Location of standpipes and boreholes are often determined by men. Females are primary collectors and managers of water, medicinal plants, wild foods and wood. Females collect these resources from areas that are often under male control and/ or ownership.
Credit/finance	M	M	Credit is generally not available for subsistence producers who are often women. Land ownership is usually required for loans, effectively limiting most women's access to credit.
Decision-making power	M	M	Generally decisions within households and communities are made by men. Female membership, if it exists, tends to be passive.
Extension	M	M	Where extension services exist they

services			are effectively available to men
M: Male		F: Female	

**Table 1: Land resource linkages: issues of access and control**

Table 1 summarises and synthesises the land resource issues identified at the community level in the fieldwork undertaken. It illustrates the prevalence of male domination in terms of both access and control to a range of household resources including land, labour, natural resources, credit/finance and extension services. Where women have access to land, permission is usually vested in male hands and they retain decision-making powers. Women only have control of domestic labour linked to reproductive responsibilities including child rearing and subsistence production.

### **The Importance of Land and Environmental Resources for Rural Women**

There are multiple facets of rural women's relationship with the land, and the importance that many attach to having a field of one's own (Agarwal 1996). For most women access to and control of arable land that is an increasingly scarce and concentrated resource, is the single most important source of security against poverty. Rao (2005:1) specifically states that control over land resources is vital for food security. Land defines social status and political power at the community and household level. Land also plays a crucial role in structuring relationships both within and outside the household.

Cross and Friedman (1997:18) assert that women and men conceptualise land rights and land use differently. They argue that while men value land for its place in organising social and political relationships, women value it mainly for its productive and reproductive use.

Land was (under older African tenure systems), and still is, used as a means to form and maintain groups, to establish leadership and to obtain followers. Since land has become very scarce, its social and political value, as a vehicle for organisation and power, has tended

to keep its value as a means of production relatively peripheral (Cross & Friedman 1997:23)

Given the scarcity of available land to African households, even with the land reform initiatives, women have to compete with men for land. The historical forces of vesting land in male hands together with pervasive patriarchal notions that inform social, political and economic processes stack against women winning this battle.

The importance of rural women having even a small field of their own increases their and their families' security against poverty. This aspect emerged repeatedly in the literature (Agarwal 1996; 1997; Carney 1993; Cross & Hornby 2002; Davison 1988; Kabadaki 1994; Kalabamu 2004; Payne 2004; Rao 2005) and responses from the field. For the vast majority of rural households, access to arable land to meet subsistence needs remains the single most important source of household security. Rights in land could reduce households' and women's risk of poverty and destitution. The reasons for this stem partly from the general positive effects of giving women access to economic resources independently from men. It is also associated with specific advantages with rights in land resources. The risk of poverty and the physical wellbeing of women and their children depend on whether they have access to income and productive assets such as land. For female-headed households with no adult male support, the link between well-being and direct access to economic resources is particularly great.

Many households interviewed indicated that they used multiple sources of fuel. This was particularly noticeable among households that had access to electricity but used wood for cooking. Many respondents whose households had access to electricity stated that they could not afford to use electricity. Thus, for poor rural households with limited access to cash income, it is not only accessibility to basic services that is important but also whether households will be able to afford these services. Some wood is also sold by a few women. Thus, the collection and access to wood can be a critical household survival resource that generates income.

Without ownership of land or tenure security women face an uncertain future. Land access helps in both direct and indirect ways. As illustrated earlier, the direct benefits are accrued by utilising land for production purposes, for residential security and to access environmental

resources. The ability of land to enable production is dependent on the type and quality of land available. The indirect benefits of land relate to facilitating access to credit and can also serve as mortgageable or saleable assets during times of severe crises. Furthermore, for vulnerable groups such as widows and the elderly, ownership of land and security of tenure strengthens their bargaining power within the household and the community.

Land, especially a sizable portion of productive land can also bolster household welfare by keeping families intact. For example, in South Africa, past policies and capitalist production, especially in the form of rural-urban migration and labour tenancy on White farms, made it impossible for poor families to remain together. Often, able-bodied adults (especially men) were forced to leave their homes in search of work. This devastating impact of apartheid is still evident in rural areas. Most women are usually left alone to rear their children. Others leave their own children to become domestic workers in urban areas, taking care of other peoples' children. The fragmentation of the Black family in both rural and urban areas has serious social, psychological and political repercussions. In terms of production, family fragmentation has often resulted in labour bottlenecks. Under these conditions, women often bear the burden of taking care of themselves and their families with meagre resources.

Responses from the primary research conducted pertaining to how acquiring land or tenure rights have changed women's lives show that there are both advantages and disadvantages. These are summarised in Table 2.

	<b>Access to land</b>	<b>Ownership to land</b>
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; opportunities for subsistence production: in this regard they being able to support their families was stressed</li> <li>&gt; opportunities to earn an income by selling agricultural crops</li> <li>&gt; access to grazing land</li> </ul>	<p>In addition to the points raised in terms of access to land the following issues were highlighted in relation to land ownership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; one woman said that she was happy that no one could evict her</li> <li>&gt; independence and control over decision-making were highlighted.</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; self-fulfilment: one woman stated that she felt like a total person ('I am now really a mother and parent in the true sense of the word')</li> <li>&gt; one woman who employed other women to help her on her farm felt that she was helping other women</li> <li>&gt; were able to control family labour</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; felt that they had no control</li> <li>&gt; women said that they did not feel secure since their land could be taken away from them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; raised concerns over maintenance of the land</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of land rights**

It is clear from the above table that the respondents linked land access and rights to positive changes in addressing the practical needs such as the potential to engage in subsistence production and generate income. Additionally, land rights in particular seem to provide women with strategic benefits related to a greater sense of security and confidence. This is linked to the idea of having increased control over their lives which often contributes to women's stronger fall-back and decision-making positions. Women perceive their bargaining capacities to be much greater when they are accorded land rights and not just access to land. In terms of disadvantages associated with accessing land, respondents felt that they had no control and that they did not feel secure since the land could be taken away from them. In terms of disadvantages associated with ownership of land, one issue emerged which related to maintaining the land. In addition to concerns raised by the respondents, Rao (2005:1) states that while a right to land for women is a positive development, it may also be leading to an

enhancement of work burdens without much change in terms of status or decision-making authority. This situation, Rao (2005:1) argues, is linked to the decreased contribution of agricultural production to household subsistence in the context of diversified rural livelihoods. Furthermore, men have been able to access the better paid, non-farm jobs, while leaving women behind to manage agricultural production.

The arguments presented above indicate that one of the most serious obstacles to increasing productivity and income of rural women is their insecurity of tenure. Women farmers whose numbers make up close to 60% of agricultural producers in developing countries need access to and ownership rights to land, management control of land-based resources and economic incentives that security of tenure best provides. This will go a long way in ensuring that land is used more efficiently and thereby make a greater contribution to food security. The governments in developing countries, including South Africa, must understand that granting security of tenure for rural poor women is a key link in the chain from household food production to national food security. The provision of land to women could have other indirect effects such as reducing outmigration to the cities. Furthermore, improving women's economic status could generate a higher demand for non-farm goods and services that could contribute to the creation of local jobs in rural areas.

The above discussion clearly illustrates that in rural areas access to land resources is central to the care and production economy, especially in terms of providing shelter, water, fuelwood and subsistence foods. In the context of developing countries a pertinent question is whether the care economy will continue to be in a position to respond to the demands made on it. Evidence indicates that the severe stress placed on the care economy has greatly reduced its ability to function. Women bear the brunt of the overburdening of this sector. Capacity building in the care economy will require serious investments in the form of service provision, adequate remuneration for underpaid work (especially in the informal economy and the domestic sector) and undertakings in human resource development (access to education and training). In the latter instance, a fundamental question is whether human and environmental resource development could be improved if women had greater access and control over land.

### **African Rural Women's Access to Communal Resources**

Communal tenure is taken to imply some form of sharing of land in a system run by traditional authorities. Control exercised over arable land under communal tenure varies significantly by region. Usufruct rights to land are important because in South Africa where land is scarce and access is highly disproportionate, for the vast majority of Africans having access to land use is crucial. Rangan (1997:8) asserts that common property resources that include grazing land, wild foods, medicinal plants, water and wood are particularly important for poorer rural households. A key issue is how the existing structures of land reformation processes are likely to affect the existing common-access lands and natural resource-based extractive activities occurring in the rural areas of South Africa. Walker (2005:313) argues:

At the heart of current debates on gender policy in land reform lies an unresolved dilemma about where, optimally, to locate rural women's interests within the communities in which they live—in pre-eminently individualist or pre-eminently collectivist constructions of rights and identities, or in some as yet uncertain (still aspirational) synthesis of the two.

Addressing women's rights to land in the context of customary practices remains a contested and complex issue in KwaZulu-Natal.

Wangari (1991) shows that land tenure reforms and land classification programmes have deprived women of access to common gathering areas where firewood, water, fodder, fibre, medicinal plants and wild foods are found. This resulted in increasing women's labour burdens and expenses and decreasing sources of income and subsistence. Rangan (1997:1) illustrates that the current trends of South African agrarian reform policies are likely to have negative impacts on a large number of Black households, particularly women and young adults. These groups' livelihood sustaining activities rely to a much greater extent on natural resource extraction from common-access lands.

The literature clearly indicates the importance of access to communal resources to women (Deshingar 1994; Rangan 1997; Wangari 1991). Many women are able to access communal resources. This depends

on the location of the resources and whether access is granted. It is important to stress that access does not imply control. For most women access to these resources is not secure. It is important to note that in the case studies, water and fuelwood points are not the same for each household. The results illustrate that women and girls are generally responsible for fetching water and collecting firewood. They also manage these resources. Their access to communal resources such as forests, wood and water are critical to household survival. Furthermore, the distance of these resources impinges greatly on women's workloads. Variations in land use can dramatically impact demand for labour, including women's labour.

The importance of access to public or communal land was expressed by most of the respondents. This illustrates that the historical advantages of accessing common property, forests and other public lands remain. This has provided multiple resources to households, especially among historically disadvantaged groups. In periods of food insecurity, for example after a poor harvest or loss of income generating activity, women spend a considerable amount of time gathering and processing wild foods. Their access to these types of resources is important in times of crisis and is generally essential for poorer households. Women in one community said they were sometimes imprisoned or harassed by neighbouring farmers because they were forced to steal water and fuelwood from surrounding farms.

### **Conclusion**

The subject of women and land is particularly neglected in research or in policy. Researchers, policy-makers, and most NGOs (including those that address women's concerns) seem preoccupied with employment as the indicator of women's economic status, to the neglect of property rights. However, as this article asserts, women's struggle for their legitimate share in landed property and resources can prove to be the single most critical entry point for women's empowerment. In legislative terms, women in South Africa are accorded rights to ensure extensive access to and control over land resources. However, the ability to enforce these laws and make them into widespread practices remains elusive. Furthermore, it is important to heed Rao's (2005:11) warning:

While equitable resource is a legitimate control for women, one needs to remember that this is accompanied by responsibility. Focusing all resources on women, and legitimising this on grounds of food security can end up both alienating men from contributing anything to the household as well as intensifying work burdens for women.

Since gender and land relations are complex, it is imperative that policies and programmes aimed at enhancing women's access and rights to land resources should be critically examined to ensure that they benefit women as well as challenge existing patterns of inequalities. As Rao (2005:12) states, the conception of gender equality must be broadened to include not just women's unequal access to resources, but also women's exclusion or inclusion in decision-making processes and the differential valuations of gendered work in relation to production and reproduction. Cross and Hornby (2002:24) assert that land access needs to be looked at in the context of what it can do for the poorest and most disadvantaged rural women:

That is, it is often a case of looking at what women can do with land that will improve their lives and their families' lives, and what the impact will be on rural poverty more widely. Tenure security is integral, as is the question of transforming gender roles and relations in the countryside.

The issue of women's land and environmental rights should be given the centrality it necessitates by policy-makers and academics who are concerned with gender and development issues. Meeker and Meekers (1997:35) illustrate that in rural Africa many development programmes, including land reform initiatives, fail to achieve their full potential to benefit women, because of a lack of understanding of how family relationships, landholding customs, household power structures, and other familial and social realities may constrain women's access to limited resources such as land.

This article illustrates that the gendered nature of land and environmental politics at the community and household level cannot be neglected or ignored. This is particularly acute in rural areas in South Africa where high levels of poverty persist and where the re-invention and re-

assertion of tradition is strengthening patriarchy. Furthermore, scarcity of environmental or natural resources is widespread. Based on the arguments above, it is clear that women's relationships to land resources are influenced by land use; land availability; power dynamics; relations of production; size and composition of the household; social status of the woman; household consumption patterns and need; natural environmental considerations; type of ownership or tenure arrangement; historical processes; and cultural practices.

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