

# From marginalisation to empowerment:

The potential of land rights to contribute to gender equality – observations from Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone. ActionAid's women's rights to land project year II.



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**ActionAid, From marginalisation to empowerment: The potential of land rights to contribute to gender equality – observations from Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone, February, 2013**

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## Preface

**This report aims to demonstrate the link between women’s secure access to and control over land, and their empowerment.**

**For many years, activists have campaigned for women’s rights to access, control, and, where context allows, own land. This is in recognition of the fact that land is important not only for growing food or as a place to build a home. Land is also a resource that can be used to generate other forms of livelihoods, a place to belong to, and an identity. This is true for both women and men. Our hypothesis, therefore, is that if women have guaranteed, independent rights to land, they will be empowered to better enjoy all their rights. This report aims to set out initial empirical research that affirms this as a fact.**

Control over land defines power. Politically, land is used as a tool for securing and exercising political patronage; economically, wealth generated from the land and land-based resources confer on the person who controls that land the ability to secure unchallenged control over other resources; and socially, the controllers of land and natural resources head family and social structures and take a lead in decision-making. Men, elites and corporates wield most power. Women and girls are discriminated against when it comes to access to, ownership of and/or control over land and property. This not only disadvantages them economically, but also reduces their dignity and compromises their rights to food, physical security, access to credit and extension services, while also constricting their space to participate in decision-making.

**What does power to control land mean for women? How can control over land be a source of power and empowerment?**

This study gathered evidence from rural women in Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone. In these countries, ActionAid is implementing a three-year women’s rights to land project with support from the European Commission. The overall objective of the project is empowerment, improved living standards and dignity for poor and excluded women. The study confirms the intrinsic relationship between women’s access to and control over land and their process of empowerment. It also confirms that empowerment is a non-linear process of change rather than a targeted or defined outcome whose interpretation is subject to complex contexts of culture, values, knowledge, relationships, attitude and behaviour/practice.

Recommendations to governments and civil society are based on the women’s views and the analysis of the study, and aim to shape and enhance the value of land as a tool for empowering women and improving their livelihoods.

We hope that this study and lessons herein will bring enduring changes in policy, practice and behaviour that will support women’s secure access to and control over land across land tenure regimes. It is only if governments ensure that their policies are implemented, which requires political will, and if they champion and take a feminist perspective on land issues, will women be empowered to realise their potential.

**Catherine Gatundu**

Coordinator for Land and Natural Resource Rights  
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## Executive summary

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**This report examines three communities of rural women – in Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone – who have secured access<sup>1</sup> to land either for farming or to live on.<sup>2</sup> The main purpose of the study is to establish the links between secure land rights and women’s empowerment broadly, and in particular women’s ability to fight hunger and withstand food crises and shocks. The research explored the question, ‘How important is secure access to and control over land as an enabling condition for women’s overall empowerment?’**

The study probes the theory of change that suggests that having land rights increases women’s individual and cumulative empowerment. Empowerment refers to women’s real or perceived ability to control or change different aspects of their personal, social, political and economic environment.

An objective reading of findings gathered from rural women and their relationship with land suggests that empowerment is a relative term, and a progressive process. When a woman can claim a small area of wasteland as her own, where before she had none, when she is able to grow some food where before she relied solely on handouts and relief, this definitely marks personal progress – but might not necessarily equate with her socio-political or economic empowerment. Further empowerment might come through the training, inputs and support she might access in order to optimise the use and productive capacity of the land. As awareness and capacity increase, so might a woman’s interest in working with others to further their individual and common rights. Acting on this interest to mobilise social and political capital through collective action implies and abets even higher levels of empowerment.

The study’s findings offer a detailed account of the link between land rights and empowerment, an innovative venture given the notable lack of literature and evidence linking these issues. In this sense, the study aims to build a better understanding of this relationship. To understand and assess empowerment, 92 rural, marginalised women in the three countries were asked about the changes that land ownership had made in their lives. The women were also invited to articulate their own sense of the empowerment that came with their access to, control over or ownership of land. The women gave their feedback on indicators of change relevant to:

- a. Food security and nutrition, such as control over personal food consumption and nutrition
- b. Personal and social empowerment, such as control over personal decisions and mobility
- c. Economic empowerment, such as their ability to leverage land rights for loans, savings, insurance and other financial instruments and ability to make decisions over what they produce
- d. Political empowerment, such as participation in political processes at different levels

The intimate glimpses of the processes of change evidenced in the stories collected in Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone point to the complexity of what the process of empowerment involves for these women. The research confirms that empowerment is a non-linear process of change rather than a targeted or

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1. Access to land does not mean autonomy over choices of land use, as is made clear in the case studies.
2. The three constituencies comprise: once displaced indigenous rural communities who have occupied farms and reclaimed land in Guatemala; untouchable Dalit women in India facing deeply embedded cultural barriers to their land claims; and women living with HIV in Sierra Leone where their illness compounds their social marginalisation.

defined outcome. Its interpretation is subject to complex contexts of culture, values, knowledge, relationships and behaviours; it is constantly negotiated and contested on an individual basis and at household and community levels.

The intimate glimpses of the processes of change evidenced in the stories collected in Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone point to the complexity of what the process of empowerment involves for these women. The research confirms that empowerment is a non-linear process of change rather than a targeted or defined outcome. Its interpretation is subject to complex contexts of culture, values, knowledge, relationships and behaviours; it is constantly negotiated and contested on an individual basis and at household and community levels.

The analysis reveals that having rights to own, access or control land does indeed mark progress for these women, and particularly in ways that are distinctly related to their contexts and cultures. In most cases, access to or control of land increased the probability of the women achieving their aspirations and ambitions, and improved their sense of empowerment. Many of the women cited the significance of ownership, access or control of land in terms of the *value* of land as a productive resource, as security, as legacy, as a symbol of status, and as a social or political mobilising force.

In fighting for their rights to claim, and control land, some women are de facto empowering themselves, sometimes quite dramatically so. Further, once they feel secure about their access to land some feel able to do and accomplish more – not just for themselves, but for their children first and then their communities. Loosely defined, land offers women a platform for action, a sense of status, and opens up possibilities for participating in nation-building – all of which can be interpreted as empowerment.

However, ultimate empowerment does not come through land rights alone. Empowerment is a gradual process that comes from being able to use the land for production. Being able to use land for production requires training, input and support (both economic and social). Participating in training, and being aware of and using different inputs and support are empowering. Empowerment thus starts with the fight for and then control over the land, and then grows with inputs and support. It culminates in being able to use the land productively and work with others to further increase production.

The key messages that emerged from the case studies are synthesised according to findings on:

a) **Land ownership is not empowering if it is insecure, if the land is insufficient or infertile** This section of the study reveals that securing parcels of land for cultivation is a process that is fraught with continuous struggle for many women. The reasons include tenuous ability to maintain their ownership, control or access, to extract productive value from poor-quality land, issues related to legal processes of tenure, and control of decision-making by male community leaders or family members. This is an area, therefore, where women's individual and collective agency and struggles require more support in the form of solidarity and campaigning.

b) **Expressions of individual empowerment** Many women felt that having access to, control over or ownership of land allowed them to exercise greater choice and decision-making, and contribute to their own wellbeing and that of their families and communities. The process of stewarding land and its productive capacity fosters a sense of pride and self-worth. Women who produced more (not necessarily for sale) felt a much greater sense of self-worth than those whose relationship to the land was limited to it being just an asset.

c) **Expressions of cumulative empowerment and solidarity** ‘Cumulative,’ or ‘collective’ empowerment extends beyond individual empowerment and the private domain when a woman collaborates with others to seek change that may benefit the wider community. Compared to landless women, women who have access to, control over and ownership of land are more politically aware, more active in public forums, movements or associations, and more engaged in contributing to collective action and voice – and not only in those relevant to the land. This kind of collective engagement, in turn, often brought a feeling of greater empowerment and sense of solidarity that stems from working collaboratively while leveraging and building their skills and capacities in mobilising around individual and collective interests and rights – sometimes referred to as social capital.

d) **How land security empowers women** The stronger women’s claim over land, the greater their participation in the household and community and the fulfilment of other rights. The section looks at women’s views of what land means to them and the ways in which having land enhances their social position and empowers them.

### **Interpreting empowerment: Domains and spheres**

This section offers insight into how the women themselves construe and experience empowerment or disempowerment in the context of their unique cultures and circumstances. The women gave feedback on the factors and features that, for them, represent empowerment and disempowerment in four distinct domains:

- In the public domain, feelings of disempowerment stem from varying degrees of disenfranchisement, low social capital and minimal political representation.
- In contrast, empowerment in the public domain often meant greater awareness of or involvement in securing their rights and interests.
- In the private domain, the women described feelings of disempowerment as stemming from limited choices and the inability to take decisions on their own or to act with autonomy on decisions ranging from best use of the land to use of contraception. They cited a combination of cultural taboos, secondary status within the household, states of fear and insecurity, low self-value and disproportionately heavy burdens of work as disempowering factors.
- Empowerment in the private domain, in contrast, ascribes feelings of inner transformation and increased worth and potential. The women feel smarter, more visible, and have feelings of greater mobility and self-determination. Even if they do not yet feel interested in or able to change the social or community status quo, they feel they can make more choices and effect change around food consumption as well as about the future and the education of their children.

These findings tell us that, in these women’s views, land access in itself is not empowering if such access is insecure, if the land is insufficient or infertile, if their control is constrained, or if they lack the resources, support or input to maximise its productive value.

The full range of economic, social and political empowerment takes place when women can extend their choices and decisions beyond their gendered household roles to include how land is used; what is planted; how their priorities and interests are represented at local government level; and how equipped they are to respond to pressures on arable land, increased industrialisation of agriculture and commercialisation of land and natural resources, as well as the implications of climate change on land use and productivity.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Towards this, the report concludes that while there is a clear and profound positive correlation between women’s land ownership, control or access and their empowerment, particularly their ability to withstand food crises and fight hunger, the links would become more robust and enduring if the following recommendations were achieved:

- There is genuine political will and resources to support their secure land access along with equal valuing of indigenous inputs and local production methods.
- The collective voice on community concerns supports, carries and gives voice to women’s priorities. Women’s agency becomes more robust within a strong community group or as members of a collective voice.
- Existing land claims are protected, with proper surveys and documentation. As part of gender-sensitive land reforms, national land audits and publicly accessible land registries should be established, and reinforced by community mapping programmes that engage women.
- Women receive training and support in agriculture methods and production.
- Civil society and human rights organisations work with rural women and their representative organisations to build their social capital and collective voice to hold governments and investors to account.
- Land rights movements encourage and support more women members to represent women’s priorities and needs at local elections.
- Governments stipulate and commit the necessary budgetary support for rural investment models that increase local food production and improve land stewardship.
- Governments commit to policy changes that promote water-harvesting farming methods and other small-scale water management practices to ensure that small-scale farming can be optimised.



**Madam Matu Yimbo, 65**, the paramount Chief from Bomotoke, Sierra Leone says “I prefer to give land for women for cultivation”, and discusses this with Actionaid and partner staff in her house.  
PHOTO: SYDNELLA ROGERS / ACTIONAID

# 1. Introduction

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## Background and objectives of the study

The purpose of this research was to quantify and qualify the intended and unintended consequences arising from rural women’s secure access to land and how that links to their empowerment and food security.<sup>3</sup> The research drew on interviews from a small sample of women, evenly drawn from three countries.<sup>4</sup> The research participants comprised indigenous women in Guatemala, Dalit women in India, and women living with HIV in Sierra Leone. All of these women face restrictions on land access or control due to their cultural or social status, and are restricted in their social interactions and in the scope of personal, social, economic or political choices they can make. The women were invited to self-assess using a number of variables such as social isolation, self-confidence, household decision-making, agency, leadership and collective voice, political ambition, influence and action.

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***“In Guatemala tradition continues to influence how land is inherited. When land is inherited by daughters, it is never the most productive parcels, but mountainous and infertile. Sons inherit the most fertile lands – for coffee, maize and citrus.”***

Woman farmer interviewed

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## Measuring women’s empowerment through security of land access

Empowerment refers to women’s real or perceived ability to control or change different aspects of their personal, social, political and economic environment. ‘Empowerment’ is a relative measure, not an absolute one. It is a non-linear process of change rather than a targeted or defined outcome. Its interpretation is subject to complex contexts of culture, values, knowledge, relationships and behaviours; it is constantly negotiated and contested on an individual basis and at household and community levels. In sum, it is a measure of relative social status that is difficult to catalogue and compare. The study from Guatemala suggests that, “...rural women’s empowerment has different features, depending on whether they are organised or not, whether they develop productive projects or not, and whether they have collective spaces to critically reframe the patriarchal reality.”<sup>5</sup> What is perhaps most profound is the way women articulate their own interpretation of issues like ‘autonomy’, ‘empowerment’, ‘food sovereignty’ and what kinds of future they foresee for themselves and their families.

Drawing on their interpretations of what empowerment, inclusion and agency means to them, this research gathered evidence from three distinct communities of women who share one common thread despite enormous cultural differences: they are communities of women who are extremely marginalised, even ostracised, in their social contexts. Adapting from the IFPRI’s<sup>6</sup> Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index<sup>7</sup>

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3. Complete research terms of reference and research methodology are reproduced in Annexes I and II.  
 4. The total sample was 103 women: 25 women in Guatemala, 30 women in India and 26 women living with HIV in Sierra Leone (out of a larger group of 58).  
 5. ActionAid International (2013) ‘Guatemala: Linkage between land rights and rural women’s empowerment’, Internal Study, unpublished.  
 6. International Food Policy Research Institute  
 7. WEAI. See <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/womens-empowerment-agriculture-index>

methodology, women's empowerment in this study is measured through economic/material, household food security/nutrition and social capital/political indicators. A questionnaire was developed to compile qualitative and quantitative data on 15 distinct indicators (see Annex II for research methodology).

### Profiles of women's relationship to land

The field research findings are from three very different contexts – previously displaced indigenous rural communities who have returned to occupy farms and reclaim land in Guatemala; untouchable Dalit women in India facing deeply embedded cultural barriers to their land claims; and women living with HIV in Sierra Leone where stigma associated with the condition compounds their social marginalisation.

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***“... being a landholder and cultivator  
I am feeling confident about myself  
and I can resist any violence against  
myself and other women in my  
neighbourhood... but this was not  
possible when I was just an  
agricultural labourer”***

Dhanamma, Andhra Pradesh

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There is a broad diversity in land tenure regimes globally; the issue of tenure is a complex, locally and historically embedded, and deeply political issue.<sup>8</sup> This makes it more difficult to secure the key determinants that shape women's access and rights to land. With regard to defining 'security of tenure,' the Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in its General Comment No. 4, notes that, “notwithstanding the *type* of tenure, all persons should possess a degree of security of tenure which guarantees legal protection against forced eviction, harassment and other threats.”<sup>9</sup> Ensuring security of tenure for women enables them to make decisions on how best to use the land for its resources and long-term sustainable investment, use land more efficiently, and gain greater access to economic opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

### Guatemala

In Guatemala, most rural women are small-farm producers. Guatemalan peasant women (indigenous and non-indigenous) have the potential to be sustainable producers, but public policies are oriented toward macro-economic growth policies and small peasant economies receive almost no government support.

Women's rights to land and property have been recognised constitutionally since the 1996 Peace Accords that established the elimination of any form of discrimination against women in relation to access to land, housing, loans and participation in development projects.<sup>11</sup> In the past decade, rural peasant women have increasingly been demanding property rights. According to the research study, although changes are occurring, the women's land rights movement lacks a clear vision.

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8. Hirsch, C., Aguilar-Støen, M. and McNeill, D. (2012), 'REDD+ and Tenure Rights,' University of Norway: Oslo. Accessed 12/02/13 at: [http://www.sum.uio.no/forskning/publikasjoner/2012/tenure\\_redd.pdf](http://www.sum.uio.no/forskning/publikasjoner/2012/tenure_redd.pdf)
  9. UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment No. 4: The Right to Adequate Housing (Art. 11 (1) of the Covenant)*, 13 December 1991, E/1992/23, accessed 12/03/13 at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/47a7079a1.html>
  10. UN Women (2012) 'Promoting security of tenure for women,' Virtual knowledge centre to end violence against women and girls, accessed 12/03/13 at: <http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/770-promoting-security-of-tenure-for-women.html>
  11. Lopez, MLM (2006) 'Indigenous Women and Governance in Guatemala,' FOCAL. Accessed 11/03/13 at: [http://www.focal.ca/pdf/mujer\\_indigena\\_e.pdf](http://www.focal.ca/pdf/mujer_indigena_e.pdf)

## Portrait of women interviewed

The women in this study are from 13 communities in three municipalities (Ixcán, Río Grande, San Carlos Alzatate), in Quiché, Suchitepéquez, and Jalapa provinces. In total, 25 rural landowners were interviewed and three group discussions took place with women of varying ages and marital status who have access to land through either communal ownership or private property. Of the 25 women, 24 had on average five children, only one had no children. The women’s ages ranged from 22 to 62 years old; ten women self-identified as mestizas<sup>12</sup> and 15 as indigenous.<sup>13</sup> Six are illiterate; 12 have incomplete elementary education; five had completed elementary education, one completed secondary education and one tertiary education.

Land ownership sample	%
Co-owner with Frontierras	28% (7)
Owner through Frontierras	32% (5)
Communal land share	20% (8)
Purchased on own	16% (4)
Inherited	4% (1)

**Table 1:** The majority of the women in the Guatemala sample either own land on the basis of communal land share, or share ownership. Inheriting land is the least common means of gaining ownership.

Marital status sample	%
Married	40% (10)
Divorced/separated	12% (3)
Single	16% (4)
Widow	16% (4)
Cohabiting	16% (4)

**Table 2:** Fourteen of the 25 women are married or cohabiting.

Eight of the 25 women are community landowners, 15 have private property titles (eight individual ownership and seven co-ownership), and two are self-described as ‘ownership in fact’ (because of the lack of documents to support their land claim). Twenty-four women have had access to land in the past eight years; only one received her inheritance 12 years ago. The system of communal land share varies throughout Guatemala; in the town of San Carlos Alzatate, for instance, all of the town’s land is considered common property. According to the General Property Registry, it is stated that the entire territory of San Carlos Alzatate is for the ‘natural population.’<sup>14</sup> Despite this, the women of San Carlos Alzatate had to fight to change a community tradition that denied land owning to women.<sup>15</sup>

## India

The sale or transfer of ownership of large tracts of land from Indian farmers to industrialists and estate agents is at the core of current land allocations. On the grounds that agriculture is no longer viable in large parts of the country, the government is ‘reforming’ the sector on the premise of ‘the second green revolution’ that encourages ‘corporate farming.’<sup>16</sup> This, combined with ‘mechanisation of labour’ is dispossessing

12. A person of mixed racial ancestry, especially of mixed European and Native American ancestry.

13. From Mam, Q’eqchi’, Popti’, K’iche’, and Kaqchikel clans

14. ActionAid International (2013) ‘Guatemala: Linkage between land rights and rural women’s empowerment’, Internal Study unpublished, p. 7.

15. *ibid*, p. 23.

16. Ramachandraiah C and Srinivasan R (2011) ‘Special economic zones as new forms of corporate land grab: experiences from India,’ in *Development* 54, 59-63. Accessed 12/03/13 at: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v54/n1/pdf/dev201099a.pdf>

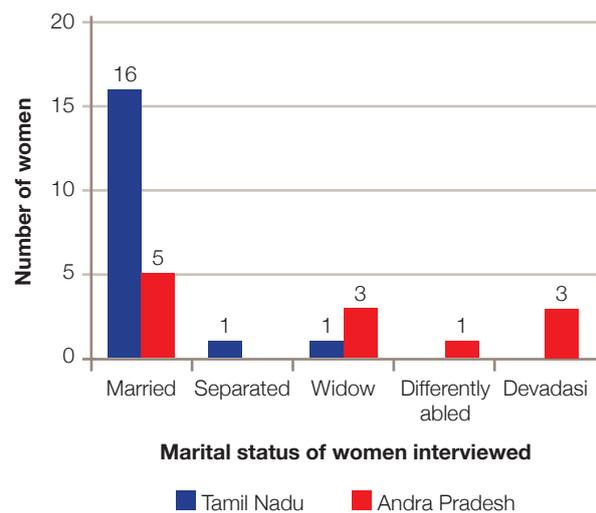
small and marginal peasants, who constitute 80.5% of total farming households.<sup>17</sup> Today, the peasantry is engulfed in a deep and intractable crisis. Compared to the 7% growth in the economy (2009-10), growth in agriculture and allied sectors was just 1%.<sup>18</sup> As agriculture distress intensifies, more and more peasants are forced out of their generational livelihood practices and towards uncertain futures at the cost of national food security.

As communities are dispossessed and more men migrate to find paid work, the feminisation of the agrarian crisis has affected every corner of the country. With farming livelihoods made increasingly vulnerable, the percentage of women joining the labour force has also increased.<sup>19</sup> Various social movements in India are critical of the systemic and trans-historically patriarchal role of the state.<sup>20</sup> The decades of struggles of these groups have revealed that, “the state is more gender-retrogressive than gender-progressive”, as it derives its laws from the unwritten norms of patriarchal society. Women’s perspectives remain underrepresented in various state policies, including land reforms and agrarian policies. Typical constraints to women’s access to land include legal conditions and economic factors such as transaction costs, credit and land prices.

### Portrait of women interviewed

Within this context and set of constraints, the confines that restrict Dalit women’s access to land become even more acute. Their economic and social status reflects the fact that they are members of the ‘lowest’ caste:

- Around 80% of Dalits and about 92% of total tribal populations live in rural areas and account for 24.4% of India’s total population<sup>21</sup>
- Dalit’s control over resources is less than 5% of total resources<sup>22</sup>
- 91% of Dalit households in rural areas are either landless or operate what are termed ‘sub-marginal’ or ‘marginal’ holdings<sup>23</sup>
- Less than 10% of Dalit households have access to sanitation<sup>24</sup>



17. Chandra, P (undated). *Labour File*, Vol. 6, No. 2&3, Labour and the Union Budget (Article - Debt Waiver and Rural Labour - pp 19 - 23)

18. World Bank (2010) *India Economic Update*. Accessed 12/03/13 at: [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INDIAEXTN/Resources/295583-1268190137195/India\\_Economic\\_Update\\_June\\_23\\_2010.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INDIAEXTN/Resources/295583-1268190137195/India_Economic_Update_June_23_2010.pdf)

19. Bhalla, Surjit and Kaur, Ravinder (2011) *Labour force participation of women in India: some facts, some queries*, Working Paper, 40. Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. p. 18.

20. Ekta Parishad is a non-violent social movement in India working on land and forest rights at a national level. It has been built up over 20 years, growing from the local, to the state, to the national and increasingly, to the international level. The purpose of ‘amassing’ a larger and larger grouping of poor people into a movement has been to put pressure directly on the central government, which is resisting reform and structural change. The structural change that Ekta Parishad is calling for is a complete land redistribution to enable the marginalised and downtrodden to get out of poverty. National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements (NFDLRM) is a nationwide mass movement initiated by more than 250 Dalit land rights movements/struggles/networks/organisations from 16 states, primarily to focus on issues of land and livelihood of Dalit communities in India from 2006. It is part of the four national movements: All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), Dalit Aarthik Adhikar Abhijan (DAAA), National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ) and National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements (NFDLRM) promoted by National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaippu in Tamil Nadu and Dalita Mahila Samakya in Andhra Pradesh are regional land rights movements in India.

21. Census of India 2001, available at: <http://censusindia.gov.in/>

22. Andharia J (2009) *The Dalit Women’s Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Samiti*,

23. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, (2012) *‘Caste Based Discrimination in India*,’ accessed 13/03/13 at: <http://www.indianet.nl/upr-caste-2012.html>

24. Sadangi HC (2008) *‘Dalit: The Downtrodden of India’* Isha Books, p. 211.

Thirty Dalit women from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh participated in the research study;<sup>25</sup> they had access to land as follows:

- access to and control over land with ownership of land - 18
- access to land without control and ownership - five
- access and control without ownership - three
- access and ownership without any control – three
- only ownership without any access and control – one

### India research sample: Size of land holdings

State	Up to 0.25 cents	0.26 cents to 0.50 cents	0.51 cents to 1 acre	1 acre to 2 acres	> 2 acres	Total
Tamil Nadu	2	3	1	9	3	18
Andhra Pradesh		4	1	4	3	12
Total	2	7	2	13	6	30

**Table 3:** Most of the land holdings are between one and two acres in size. Overall, nearly twice as many women in the sample own an acre or less, as women owning two acres or more.

Category of land security	Tamil Nadu	Andhra Pradesh	Total
Full access, control and ownership	11	7	18
Access only	3	2	5
Access and control, but no ownership	2	1	3
Access and ownership, but no control	2	1	3
Women with only ownership - tokenistic	-	1	1
Total	18	12	30

**Table 4:** Eighteen out of 30 women had full access, control and ownership over their land, while over a third did not enjoy full land security.

The women from Tamil Nadu are members of Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaippu (DMK – Land Rights Forum promoted by the Institute for Research and Documentation in Social Sciences IRDS).<sup>26</sup> More than half of the women interviewed (57%) belong to the Paraiyar Community (Tamil Nadu) or the Mala community (Andhra Pradesh); 40% belong to the Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu or the Madhika community in Andhra Pradesh. One woman, a Devadasi, came from an inland fishing community.<sup>27</sup>

25. This is not a representative sample; however, it is a well-known fact that Dalit women have hardly any access to land in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. An average of three to four women have land ownership in each village. The first criteria in selecting the women for this research was legal ownership, followed by access and control. Women were selected from a geographically diverse selection of villages where women have land and from a diversity of social standing within the Dalit caste system. It was also important to identify women who could articulate empowerment through land rights – the selection was managed by the ActionAid India partner in both states.

26. One participant, Muniammal, from a non-ActionAid intervention area, has full access, control and ownership of land but is not a member of any land rights forum, and Rani, from Vellore, also has not been part of DMK so far.

27. The Dalit community has different sub-caste systems. This research included two predominant sub-caste systems of Dalit community: Paraiyar or Adhidraavidars community in Tamil Nadu and Mala community in Andhra Pradesh. Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu and Madiga Community in Andhra Pradesh are at the bottom level of the social ladder. They are discriminated by the Paraiyars / Adhidraavidar/ Mala communities in social activities in addition to the pressures they face from the dominant caste.

All Dalit women who are members of the Land Rights Forum have made various protests in attempts to influence government policies with respect to land. The women from Andhra Pradesh are members of Dalita Mahila Samakya, promoted by AARDIP,<sup>28</sup> and two are Jogini<sup>29</sup> women.

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***“With the facilitation of the Land Rights Forum I identified waste land near the banks of a lake and motivated the women and men to clean up the land and prepare it for cultivation. Earlier, the land was under the control of ten Koundar families, they sent people to attack us. The Dalit community started dharna (blockades) and protest to secure the wasteland in our name from government. After a series of petitions we were provided with patta (title) in our names. I too got ¼ acre of the wasteland and registered it in my name. Though the land given to us is very meagre, it brought us big relief from consuming the rotten rice provided in the ration shops run by government.”***

Jayamma

.....

Assigned land and ceiling land allocated to the Dalit community by the government is usually ‘wasteland’, which is also often the only land that Dalit women can afford to purchase. In Tamil Nadu, out of the 18 women interviewed, nine Dalit women purchased land, five had inherited land and three received government allocations. In Andhra Pradesh, out of 12 women interviewed, five had inherited land and five were assigned land by the government.

Of all the 30 women interviewed, 60% grew only one crop in a year, dependent upon the monsoon rains, 30% grew a second crop, and only 3% of the women, ie only one woman, grew three crops in a year. In Thiruvallur district, the women who own land have not cultivated the land for three years, because of monsoon failure. Some women only grow cash crops, such as cotton, eucalyptus and tubers, due to pressure from the government.

**Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone is a predominantly rural country caught between civil and customary laws. Traditional customary laws, for instance, treat women as ‘chattels’<sup>30</sup> to be inherited. In other areas women are regarded as minors in need of guardianship from a male family member. Women face discrimination in the exercise of political, social, civil, economic and cultural rights. Under customary law, it is difficult for a wife to seek redress before the courts against her husband.

Women living with HIV face extreme vulnerability and stigma. They are ostracised from society and blamed for their illness. They live with extreme discrimination and little opportunity to earn income or contribute to society. Their main concern is not land ownership, but finding daily food and fighting against social stigma.

Although it is a signatory to several international treaties that promote gender equality, the Sierra Leone government has yet to institutionalise and effect any real change. Gender inequality and discrimination still exist at all levels of society.

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28. www.aardip.org AARDIP was started in 1988 and is working with multi-pronged developmental activities and starting to bring social, economic and cultural justice to marginalised people in Kurnool District, covering 360 villages and expanded to other districts, e.g. Prakasham and Kadapa.

29. Jogini women are bonded to serve prostitution As part of the village religious customs. Both women are members of JVVVP, a women’s movement promoted by AASHRAY working for the eradication of the Jogini system. These Jogini women are also members of a right to food committee in their village.

30. In common law systems, personal property may also be called chattels – women are treated as property in this case.

The communal land system comprises both family-owned and community-owned land. Land is predominantly family-owned (83%) in all the districts. An older male member of the family holds the land in trust for the family. Access to family-owned land is granted by the head of the family, in consultation with other male family members. Similarly, the chief, who is the traditional leader, is the custodian of the community land.<sup>31</sup> The chief, in consultation with other community elders grants access to land. This ultimately means that less powerful members of rural communities, including women, do not have equal opportunities to access productive land. Customs relating to inheritance and property rights, such as the loss of a woman’s right to keep her husband’s land in the case of his death or absence, contribute further to the gendered challenges of land access and control in Sierra Leone.

### Portrait of women interviewed

- 37 respondents (63.8%) had no form of education
- In Kambia and Bombali, only 10% of respondents had some form of education; in Tonkolili, none of respondents had any form of education
- 30.4% of respondents live in households with 16 or more people, compared to 21% and 22% of respondents living in households with 1-5 people and 11-15 people respectively
- The lowest household size (1-5 people) was recorded in Freetown (75%) and the highest household size (16+) was recorded in Tonkolili (70%)
- 42 of the respondents have not had the opportunity to share their experiences of farming practices, health or food with others in a forum-type setting. Those who were able to participate felt it gave them a sense of empowerment and increased self-esteem
- The focus group discussions indicated that women who are educated and married to wealthy men are more likely to have some form of control of land and property
- 55% of people aged 15-24 are either not in school, unemployed or economically inactive. Out of the 58 women interviewed, 26 are living with HIV. Six women living with HIV were interviewed in Moyamba, two in Freetown, six in Bombali, three in Tonkolili, six in Kambia and two in Bo.

### Source of land owned: percentage distribution

District	Inheritance	Purchased/bought	Unspecified	Total
Bo	50	50	0	100
Freetown	50	50	0	100
Kambia	90	10	0	100
Moyamba	60	20	20	100
Tonkolili	50	50	0	100
Bombali	80	10	10	100
Total	63.3	31.6	5	100

**Table 5:** Only about 30% of women have private **individual** title deeds. Of these, 60% are found in the Freetown, Bo and Tonkolili where there half of land owned is through purchase. Most of the women (70%) reported having **family** title deeds. This is higher in Bombali and Kambia, which recorded 90% and 80% respectively of land owned through inheritance. It is evident that most women who acquired land through inheritance do not have individual title deeds. This is due to the land tenure system in rural areas, where land is family or communally owned.

31. USAID (2010) Country Profile: Sierra Leone, *Property Rights and Resource Governance*, p. 3. Accessed 13/03/13 at: <http://usaidlandtenure.net/sierra-leone>

There is a sense of limited opportunities for women to utilise and control land for any economic purpose of their choice. Circumstances for the single women are even worse. They are regarded as irresponsible women and may be allocated a very small portion of land, if any. This can lead to women entering into risky relationships just to secure a living, which adds to their low level of confidence and self-esteem, and they cannot safely engage in any community development discourse.

According to an FAO report, “Field interviews with members of women’s farming groups reveal that there is a strong desire by women to be able to inherit land, but in many cases a continued inability to do so. This can be an important desire in a post-war context where many male head of households were killed in the war, or are unable or unwilling to return to home areas. In some locations, namely the east and south of the country, women enjoy greater rights, can inherit land and property and become paramount chiefs. In the north of the country this is not the case and women continue to enjoy substantially less rights than men.”<sup>32</sup>

### Some country data comparisons

In the three countries studied, women’s ownership of landed property is, to varying degrees, dictated by patriarchal forms of ownership. Of the three countries, Sierra Leone has the highest annual rural population growth rate, and the highest percentage of the economically active population in agriculture. Compared to India and Guatemala, Sierra Leone (see Table 6) also has much higher rates of illiteracy, higher levels of maternal and infant mortality, a larger proportion of the population living below the poverty line, a higher prevalence of HIV among adults, and very low mobile phone use. In all three countries, more than half of the total population lives in rural areas, and Sierra Leone and Guatemala both have a high GINI coefficient.



**San Carlos, 30, and team,** participating in the group discussion during research process in North Region, Guatemala.  
PHOTO: ROSALINDA HERNANDEZ / RESERACHER

32. FAO (2006) ‘Land tenure, food security and investment in postwar Sierra Leone,’ Livelihood Support Programme Working Paper 22. Accessed 13/03/13 at: [http://www.fao.org/sd/dim\\_pe4/pe4\\_061201\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe4/pe4_061201_en.htm)

Country comparators<sup>33</sup>

	Sierra Leone	India	Guatemala
<b>GDP (per capita, US\$)</b>	\$966.49	\$3,751.99	\$4,757.23
<b>HDI</b>	0.298	0.602	0.663
<b>GINI Index<sup>34</sup></b>	62.9	36.8	59.6
<b>Population below poverty line (%)</b>	70.2%	29.8%	54%
<b>Population<sup>35</sup></b>	5,485,998	1,205,073,612	14,099,032
<b>Proportion of the total population in rural areas (%)<sup>36</sup></b>	62%	70%	51%
<b>Average annual growth rate of rural population (%)<sup>37</sup></b>	2.2	1.1	1.6
<b>Economically active population in agriculture %<sup>38</sup></b>	60%	54%	38%
<b>Literacy<sup>39</sup></b>	35.1	61	69.1
<b>Average years of schooling adults</b>	2.4	5.1	3.5
<b>Arable and permanent cropland</b>	550,000 hectares	169,700 hectares	1,905 hectares
<b>HIV/AIDS – adult prevalence rate<sup>40</sup></b>	1.6%	0.3%	0.8%
<b>HIV/AIDS – people living with infection<sup>41</sup></b>	49,000	2,400,000	62,000
<b>Maternal mortality<sup>42</sup></b>	890 per 100,000	540 per 100,000	120 per 100,000
<b>Infant mortality<sup>43</sup></b>	76.64 deaths/ 1,000 live births	46.07 deaths/ 1,000 live births	25.16 deaths/ 1,000 live births
<b>Telephones – fixed lines per 100 people<sup>44</sup></b>	0.22	2.99	11.29
<b>Mobile telephones in use per 100 people<sup>45</sup></b>	31.06	64.1	136.09

**Table 6:** EOf the three countries, Guatemala has the highest GDP, followed by India. Sierra Leone is significantly poorer, having a GDP almost four times lower than the other two countries, lower quality of life indices and higher HIV prevalence. Sierra Leone has the highest annual rural population growth rate, and the highest percentage of the economically active population in agriculture.

33. Source: Nation master statistics (<http://www.nationmaster.com/statistics>)

34. The GINI index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Lorenz curve plots the cumulative percentages of total income received against the cumulative number of recipients, starting with the poorest individual or household. The GINI index measures the area between the Lorenz curve and a hypothetical line of absolute equality, expressed as a percentage of the maximum area under the line. Thus a GINI index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

35. *ibid*

36. *ibid*

37. *ibid*. Between 2005-2010

38. *ibid*

39. *ibid*

40. *ibid*

41. *ibid*

42. *ibid*

43. *ibid*

44. *ibid*

45. *ibid*

## 2. Case studies: synthesis of key findings

During a focus group reflection, women drafted the following definitions:

**Autonomy: “It means my own domain. It means the exercise of our rights. It is to practise our women’s rights. With autonomy we can get ahead. It means to be my own authority. It is an independent persona.”**

**Empowerment: “It means our property and our legal documents, nobody can take them away. We are empowered by training workshops, because we learn to value ourselves as women, we are able to decide anything.”**

**“If we do not participate, that means we do not value ourselves. If fear dominates us, there is no empowerment.”**

Source: Guatemala research report

Despite differences in context and culture, and the study’s limited sample size, shared elements of the case studies begin to create a comprehensive portrait of potential links between secure land access and women’s empowerment and ability to fight hunger. Has secured access to a natural resource – in this case land – increased or improved the probability of women achieving their aspirations, ambitions and sense of empowerment? To understand and assess empowerment, the study evaluated outcomes for women; and although outcomes in themselves are not measures of empowerment they validate the changes that land ownership make to women’s lives. The study also assessed whether, in fact, women leveraged their land-based assets to secure other economic resources, including food security, to increase empowerment.<sup>46</sup>

### **a) Land ownership is not empowering if it is insecure, if the land is insufficient or infertile**

The one underlying feature common to the three samples is that securing small parcels of land for cultivation continues to be an enormous, uphill and fraught struggle.<sup>47</sup> Despite national regulatory, legislative and programmatic efforts (eg consecutive five-year plans in India),<sup>48</sup> deliberate programme initiatives (eg the Land Fund in Guatemala) or targeted awareness programmes (e.g. with women living

46. Drawing on Uphoff (2003)

47. In the target areas under study in Guatemala, the land was actively reclaimed by displaced peasantry. In 2000, women and men from nearby farms organised to recover lands in San Basilio Hacienda. At first, 62 families started the recovery movement and there was a lot of pressure to remove them. The CUC organisation called on its members to join this struggle and increase the number of beneficiaries, and in a few days the number of applicants doubled. A three-year occupation movement faced off the Guatemalan army. Those farmers without land faced eviction attempts and violence by security forces. “The ‘antimotines’ (special police force) came to throw us out but we won; now we are landowners.” The applicant families were able to recover most of the extension of San Basilio Hacienda through an official institution, FONTIERRAS. In Ixcán, Quiché highly organised cooperative groups rejected the presence of oil companies on their land in the 1970s because it represented a threat to peasant production. Following the counterinsurgency policy between 1980 and 1982, thousands of residents were displaced; some fled to Mexico, and some to the mountains – living as refugees in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo. In 1990 a rural women’s organisation, Mamá Maquín, was formed and 1992 saw the return of organised families – among the first were Cuarto Pueblo, Pueblo Nuevo, Mayaland communities. Some 23,000 people returned to the country as a collective movement, “20% came back to their own land, other people received land in compensation or credits for purchase a parcel,” 43,000 returned as dispersed mobilisation. FONTIERRAS (the official Land Fund) participated in the provision of some land.

48. In the late 1970s – UN women’s decade (1975-1985) – women’s organisations demanded joint title. This was reflected in India’s sixth five-year plan (1980-85). In 1985-1990, the seventh plan, the ‘national perspective plan for women,’ committed to upgrading rural women’s skills and women’s access to land. The next five-year plan called for joint title to spouses in productive assets, houses, and homestead sites. It also directed states to allocate 40% of surplus land to women, particularly women-headed households, under the Land Ceiling Act. The 10th five-year plan talked about increasing women’s productivity while increasing work opportunities, regularising leasing and share-cropping of uncultivated agricultural land by women’s groups.

with HIV in Sierra Leone), women face a tenuous hold over prime land. This means that the number of women who actually secure land is not only extremely small<sup>49</sup> (as evidenced by the proportionally small sample of women available for this study) but also that as other, more powerful, demands for land holdings increase, these women will find it more difficult to protect their interests without direct political support<sup>50</sup> and new land allocations to women will be more difficult to attain.

Despite the fact that women in the study<sup>51</sup> have who, in their own estimation, already secured some land, they continue to face challenges:

- They could lose the land at any time – sometimes because formal processes and documentation are incomplete,<sup>52</sup> or because they are pressured into selling. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, Dalit lands have been mortgaged or sold for very meagre amounts to people of the ‘dominant’ caste.<sup>53</sup>
- Those women who have been involved in a longer struggle over time in Guatemala<sup>54</sup> are more likely to maintain control over the lands that they have fought for, and yet, with one exception, all participants in Guatemala reported that they faced opposition from male leaders in their communities as well as from their brothers, and had difficulty finding land to buy and accessing credit.
- The parcels of land these women are allocated or can afford are often of minimal productive value and size.<sup>55</sup> Out of the 30 women interviewed in India, only six owned over two acres<sup>56</sup> and 11 owned less

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***“I am a woman who is an owner because of the struggle, not by inheritance or sale. The best thing for me is that here there is no domestic violence, we have fruit and eat more, maybe before I could buy those things but not always. Here, we have no money, but we eat any time we want.”***

Woman in Guatemala,  
after 20 years in a violent marriage

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***“...the government is insisting we buy a specific variety of cotton seed and use fertilizers to protect the crops from pest. We are forced to follow them. As a result, the traditional seeds are no longer the asset of the farming community in our village.”***

Dalit woman, Andhra Pradesh

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49. In Tamil Nadu, out of 144,703 women in 300 villages, just 1,314 (0.91%) women own land and of this number only 0.4% own agricultural land (source: India Base Line Study).

50. In Gadivemulu Mandal, 1,500 acres of wetland has been allocated to Jindal Cement Factory. But in the same village, there are 170 landless Dalit families who depend on agriculture but are denied land rights. The Dalit families are constantly struggle against the factory and have organised several protests. However, there has as yet been no response from the state (findings from field research).

51. In India, interviews were conducted with the few women who have ownership of, control and access to land from the operational area. Focus group discussions were held with landless women and landed women separately.

52. In Tamil Nadu, some of the women were in possession of land but had not received the title deed (patta), while others had title deeds but the land measurement, survey and transfer had not taken place. Those without title deeds are not legible for any government credit support.

53. In Tamil Nadu, agricultural land (some of it fertile with the potential of an irrigation well) had been assigned to Dalit communities as Panchami Land during the British period. This access is now threatened by encroachment from other communities and business interests.

54. The women of St Basilio occupied a farm for three years, pressuring the government until they gained possession. The women of Ixcan began their fight from Mexico as refugees and later in Guatemala until they were recognised as landowners or co-owners. Women in San Carlos Alzatate fought to change a community tradition that denied land owning to women.

55. Most of the land assigned by the government is ‘wasteland’ and dry land (rain fed). In Andhra Pradesh the assigned land and ceiling land allocated by the government is wasteland, including the recent assignments given to women in poor households. Dalit women purchasing land can only afford wasteland with the very meagre savings they have.

56. One hectare is equivalent to 2.4 acres.

than one acre; 13 women owned between one and two acres. This has direct implications for both the productive capacity of land and its economic value for leveraging loans or credit.

- Decisions on how to use the land might rest with more powerful interests – from male family members to national government policies. While the land might be in a woman’s possession, she may choose not to cultivate it at all, “due to the threat of dominant caste men”.<sup>57</sup> Systemic government support for farming production favours<sup>58</sup> cash crops (like cotton) for the market and use of industrial seeds and pesticides – as opposed to investing in local seed management practices.

Despite these challenges, the interviews and focus groups findings indicate that women very much value securing land for themselves and for future generations. Most, if not all, feel that secure access to land does empower them on an individual and communal basis.

**b) Expressions of individual empowerment**

**i) Impact of land access on decision-making**

In expressing their assessments of individual choice and agency, almost all the Dalit women felt that their decision-making had improved as a direct result of their secure access to land.

A more profound relationship with land developed when the women were able to work the land optimally and contribute to the overall wellbeing of their family and community. Women who produced more felt a much greater sense of self-worth than those whose relationship to land was limited to just asset ownership. In Guatemala, this was echoed by women who felt empowered particularly by what they could produce from the land and their contribution to the family’s daily sustenance. The natural process of stewarding land and its productive capacity fosters a sense of pride and care. In Sierra Leone, this aspect is less apparent as more of the land is accessed through existing relationships with male family members.

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***“...it is my pride and dignity that I have land of my own and have no fear that I won’t get a meal the next day – my land is my present and future and through it I can survive and also help others survive.”***

Dalit woman expressing her sense of individual empowerment

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Working, harvesting and caring for land is a matter of pride and dignity for many women. As a direct result of having a stake in land, they are spoken to, involved in meetings, treated with some degree of respect and feel a sense of status and acknowledged responsibility. In Guatemala, it is apparent that women’s empowerment is represented in the ways they can produce – their pride lies in their contribution to the welfare of the family and community. In the majority of cases, the women were less likely to regard the land as a capital asset that might be leveraged – they did not consider themselves to be any wealthier as landowners, but their sense of wealth is linked to what they can produce from the land.

57. ActionAid India, Baseline Study, November 2012

58. Women interviewed in Andhra Pradesh in Adoni Region noted particularly that they are urged to use pesticides and cash crops by the government and seed companies. This result in very poor access to food grains and entire families in the villages are dependent on the market for their food. “There needs to be a ban on the company seeds and more encouragement and investment should be for traditional seeds,” say the women.

It was apparent, too, that women struggled to keep their land optimally productive, primarily because they received minimal support to improve their farming practices. Almost all the women interviewed were quite confident of their farming knowledge but decried the absence of systematic government support for their activities. In Guatemala, close to half the women interviewed are uninformed about public policies and agrarian issues. Nonetheless, about a quarter of the women have forwarded demands related to land, participated in land protests and supported the adoption of an agricultural policy. Seven women have participated in Municipal Development Councils and eight in Community Development Councils.<sup>59</sup> This suggests that women can be conscious of their land claims without necessarily being informed of public policies related to agricultural issues.

### Impact of land access on food security

Comparing land allocations, it appears that the women in Guatemala had fertile parcels that were large enough to supplement household food requirements, while the Dalit women in India were dependent on rain and had poor-quality land overall. Participant women in Sierra Leone had access to fruit trees and seasonal fish to supplement their land produce, but relied on the market almost entirely for their daily staples.

All three groups of women had a relatively low protein intake – reflecting their low incomes. Of particular note, is that these groups of women did not consider borrowing against the value of their land. This is because their interpretation of the economic empowerment of land is limited primarily to what the land can produce, and reflects their difficulty in accessing loans or credit. Such difficulty is due to the perceived role and status of women in society, and to the use of such small land parcels (usually less than two acres) as collateral. How does this translate into measures of food security and the ability to stave off hunger? Experiences are mixed. Compared to those with

no land security, women who have access to and control over land and its productivity are in a relatively stronger position to supplement family food requirements. The research indicates that Dalit women want to grow more grains and use traditional farming practices to get nutritious food. However, in India, the data analysis and interviews with women indicate that there is increasing dependence on the market for food. This is ultimately because of insufficient resources to support agricultural self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, one participant in India says, “If I work in the field, you people (research team) can eat, but if you work I cannot eat, that is the status of farming community. If more land is brought under cash crops then there is no food security for all of us. Hence, government should take measures to improve the fertility of land and bring more land under the cultivation of food crops.”

**“...I only had access to land when my husband was still alive but since his death, life became worse. I can hardly eat a daily meal, even though the family members of my husband are farming on the land, our land. I am below the five steps of the ladders ?explain this? and this has been the case for most of the widows in the communities. Five years back, at least I was above the fifth step of the ladder when I had access and control over my husband’s land, our land.”**

Woman living with HIV in Tonkalili,  
Sierra Leone

59. Article 1. The Development Council System is the primary means of participation for Mayan, Garifuna and Xinca and non-indigenous people in governance to carry out the process of democratic development planning, taking into account principles of national unity, and the multi-ethnic and multilingual Guatemalan nation. Article 14. Functions of Community Development Councils (COCODE)... d. Promote policies, programmes and projects to protect and promote comprehensive childhood, adolescents, youth and women. *Councils Act Urban and Rural Development*. Decree 11-2002 of the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala. Guatemala, 2002.

Of the women landowners who participated in the research, 93% are active members of land rights forums and also engage in food sovereignty<sup>60</sup> issues in their community. They also feel that the possession of land has given them courage and social status in their community and between communities. The women who are part of the land rights movements are more aware of food sovereignty issues than the women who are not part of any forums. Similarly, knowledge of sustainable agriculture and collective farming is greater among those women who participate in forums.

In Guatemala, 80% of the respondents practised traditional farming (corn, beans, chayote and herbs), and the management of native seeds. Sixteen women have incorporated new practices in order to produce food without the use of chemicals. Here, too, the survey results<sup>61</sup> indicated a strong correlation between implementing sustainable agricultural practices and an understanding of food sovereignty. Those who had not changed their practices in food production had also not participated in any training related to sustainable agriculture.

### **c) Expressions of cumulative empowerment**

Cumulative, or collective empowerment – in contrast to individual empowerment – goes beyond the private domain where the individual can now make meaningful choices that also benefit others in the community. Women who have access to, control over or ownership of land are more politically aware of their status and their peers compared to women who lack any of the above. Dalit women in control of productive land resources are more active in public forums, not only because they have a vested interest in community decisions, but also because their opinions are seen to count.

As evidenced from the case studies, all those women who were engaged in one way or another with organised movements or associations assessed their empowerment by their capacity to contribute to collective action and voice. In the same vein, women who engage in public forums become more involved and aware of other community struggles; for example, in Guatemala, women agitate together in solidarity for health rights or to regulate mining activities in their localities.

The absence of a land rights movement in Sierra Leone is noticeable; the instances where women have laid claim to land is where they have inherited land or purchased their own as individuals. The sense of empowerment and solidarity that then comes from working collectively to improve the land status of all women in the community appears to be missing. In the sample from Sierra Leone, only 16 out of 58 women felt they had something to contribute in public forums, although all 16 felt that this gave them a feeling of empowerment and self-esteem. In both India and Guatemala, a very small minority of women (one or two) stood for local elections, whereas this did not happen at all in Sierra Leone. This suggests that land rights movements are an important impetus for women's political empowerment.

### **d) How land security empowers women**

The study has established that the more precarious a woman's land rights are, the less capacity she will have to produce from, and reinvest, in the land and to advocate for representation. The converse is also true: the stronger a woman's claim over land, the greater her participation in the household and the community and the fulfilment of other rights. This aspect of empowerment is especially important, given the prevailing male preference in inheritance, male privilege in marriage and male bias in state programmes of land and resource distribution. The deeper a woman's vested interest in the land that she stewards, the deeper her ecological (and perhaps even spiritual) empowerment. Given her specific gendered roles, she is also more likely to be concerned with the welfare of the next generation.

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60. Loosely defined here as the rights of people to determine what they grow and for what purposes.

61. ActionAid International (2013) *Guatemala: Linkage between land rights and rural women's empowerment*, Internal Study (unpublished), p 20.

## The significance of land as seen through women’s eyes

The stories from the women interviewed are rich expressions of various forms of repression and resistance, and how their claim over land gave them a platform for action, a sense of status and opened up possibilities for change. For women, secure access to land has great significance: land as a social and political mobilising force, land as security and legacy, and land as a status symbol and productive resource.

### 1. Land as a mobilising force

Mobilising around a newly created or a common identity may serve to secure other rights, including political ones. This points to the process of empowerment through collective voice. In sum, the experiences of the women interviewed indicate that:

- Formal organisation around land movements provides women with a recognised channel through which to voice their demands – land becomes a rallying focus for demanding legal and political rights.
- Land rights movements become more proactive in addressing the priorities of their women members as the critical mass of women’s membership and women’s collective voice rises.
- While title to land or security of access is a priority, it is not the sole objective for most women; they place a high value on being part of a representative organisation or movement. In other words, the social capital aspect of land is invaluable to women landowners.

.....

***“I had the misfortune of living with a husband who drank and gave us many disappointments. When my son was an adult, he bought me a plot. Self-defence is the same when I have something of my own, now I have access to land. When I had no land, it was like being alone.”***

Floralma González, ASODEMNA-San Carlos Alzatate

.....

Where women are not organised (as part of movements or collective voice) they must defend their land rights individually – and this can be extremely challenging (as evidenced by some Dalit women and women living with HIV in Sierra Leone).

### 2. Land as security and legacy

Evidence from Guatemala suggests that women who use communal land and those who have documented access to private property (owned or co-owned) are similarly empowered. This is noteworthy because, arguably, communal property cannot be mortgaged or sold, unlike titled properties registered with the General Registry of Property. Land is the backbone of agricultural and pastoral livelihoods and, by extension, a communal safety net. Land provides a place of cultural and social belonging with symbolic and spiritual values as well as a place of residence, a registered address to allow people to vote in elections, and an inheritance for future generations.<sup>62</sup>

The experiences of the women reinforce this:

- Women are reluctant to borrow against the value of the land, aware that in doing so they could risk losing a precious asset to debt. At the same time, ownership of small parcels of land does not automatically make them credit worthy for loans (see box below on land collateral in Sierra Leone).
- Women save to further invest in their land. This might include building homesteads, planting trees, and other long-term measures to steward the land and its natural assets.

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62. ActionAid International (2013) *Guatemala: Linkage between land rights and rural women’s empowerment*, internal study, unpublished.

- Women are able to break with tradition and consider leaving land to their daughters, and not just their sons (more so in Guatemala than in India, where a woman’s inheritance might go to her husband’s family). They are concerned to maintain the security of the next generation.

.....

***“I feel empowered because I have a document (title), I can decide what to plant and what products to sell. I have the pleasure of saying I bought this. It is a joy, I feel relieved”***

Zandra Náiera,  
ASODEMNA-San  
Carlos Alzatate

.....

**‘Land has no value’ as collateral: Sierra Leone**

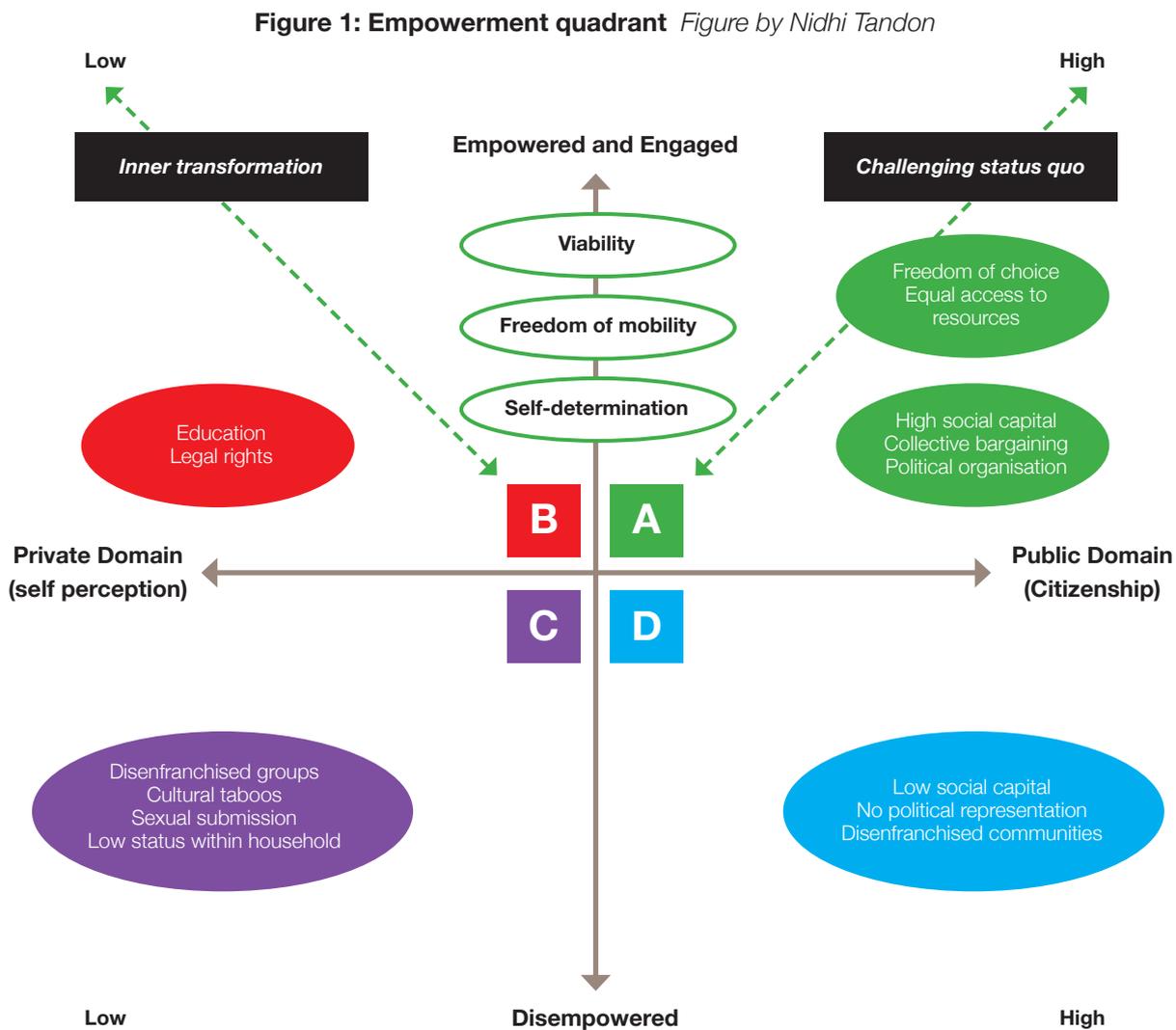
As in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, land is considered ‘priceless’ – beyond a monetary value and therefore not up for leverage. A 2006 report from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) explains: “The chiefs interviewed likewise did not look positively on using land as collateral. The primary issue is the possibility of losing the land permanently and the resulting landlessness for people within the chiefdom. The idea of the ‘risk of landlessness’ and what would result once one is landless, for both the landowners and the paramount chiefs, is critical, and real or imagined, it operates to strongly influence decision making, opportunities, risk-taking, and trust. From the perspective of some chiefs, it would be acceptable to have a bank use a lease arrangement as collateral for a loan, if the bank is willing to take over the lease terms. In other chiefdoms, the perspective is different, with one paramount chief stating that, ‘land has no value’.”



**Bhavani, 68**, sitting in the land which she received recently in Bomapuram village, Andhra Pradesh, India.  
PHOTO: ANNIE THOMAS / ACTIONAID

### 3. Interpreting empowerment: domains and spheres

Figure 1 represents the levels of empowerment apparent in the research findings; these complement the evidence collected in the case studies.



The figure above depicts four quadrants representing different domains and spheres of empowerment as experienced by the women in this study. The horizontal axis spans individual status to the concept of citizenry (private domain to public domain), the vertical axis represents degree of empowerment.

**Quadrant A:** Represents empowerment beyond the personal domain and into the collective and public realm – leading to structural changes in power relations as distinct from partial empowerment of certain individuals. Innovative forms of associations and mobilisation around issues are integral to the deepening of social capital and representation in political institutions so that women can engage in making decisions that affect the lives of others like them. Unlike Quadrant C, here women will *reframe their relations to institutionalised power*. At its highest point, political empowerment seeks to challenge and transform the status quo.

**Quadrant B:** Reflects a stage of inner-transformation, still in the private domain, but higher up the vertical axis of empowerment – a partial empowerment of individuals within an unequal system where women are collectively still at a disadvantage. Here women seek ways of *adapting themselves to the status quo*. On account of legal changes, and with awareness of these rights, women can claim, among other things, their land rights – they also gain a legal identity. They are best able to do this with government support and as a collective voice. Legal and policy frameworks are important elements in changing how are done as well as how women envisage themselves and are regarded by others, enhancing their capacity to act to bring about changes in their lives and those around them and stepping outside the labels they are given by society. The further along the horizontal axis they move, the more likely they are to gain visibility, freedom of mobility and self-determination. On gaining access to land, most of the women interviewed expressed more confidence about making decisions around food consumption at household level and how their children would be educated. What represents empowerment is the way they value what they produce.

Another important feature is that those women who had opportunities to gain practical training and literacy – and who were able to share lessons learned and update their knowledge – also felt a sense of empowerment. In San Basilio, Guatemala, seven out of ten respondents said they had not received such training and had no ability to participate in decision-making about community food or health issues.

**Quadrant C:** Represents women's disempowerment in the private domain, which women express as either an inability to make decisions on their own or a lack of autonomy – for instance, in relation to decisions on land use or contraception use. Quadrant C represents women's sense of self in the private domain but still within the restrictions of their community – they face a combination of cultural taboos, a secondary status within the household; this can range from a state of fear, to low self-esteem, limited choices and a disproportionately heavy burden of work. *The social institutions around them shape their identities*. Placing land rights in the hands of women in this quadrant does not necessarily empower all of them since they still face suppression in the institutional contexts.

**Quadrant D:** Represents the contextual backdrop of social groups that for historical, cultural and other reasons have been displaced, disenfranchised, or systematically discriminated against. Women within these communities are, because of their gender, at the bottom of the social totem pole.

In sum, the women interview for this study had successfully claimed land in contexts where their identities are shaped, and even restricted, by social institutions and norms around them. With land now in their hands, some women seek ways to adapt to the status quo, to 'fit in' better while stepping out of labels given them by society. Within this small group, an even smaller percentage begins to reframe their relations to institutionalised power, and seek further rights on behalf of themselves and others. What is apparent is that controlling land is, on its own, an important – yet sometimes tenuous – step to women's empowerment.

Changes in one sphere of relations may not necessarily trigger changes in another sphere; at the same time, advances made over time can also be reversed or lost.

Although some women fought for their land rights in the public domain (as in Guatemala), only a few have chosen to take their actions into the political sphere or to mobilise around their individual and collective rights (into Quadrant A). While it might seem unlikely that individual rights can be lost or empowerment reversed once individual awareness is raised, it does not take much to undo progress. It is already evident that the few land rights that women have been able to claim are under siege by other powerful interests. Setbacks can occur in the private domain (illness, widowhood, droughts or floods) and in the public domain (if government policy changes direction, or social support is cut, or the freedoms of land movements are curtailed).

## 4. Conclusion and recommendations

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### **Maintain support for and strengthen peasant land movements**

Despite the limited sample size, this study provides some evidence suggesting that when women share in assets and land ownership there are positive correlations with higher food expenditure and rural productivity.<sup>63</sup> But in spite of this evidence, governments seem to be unable or unwilling to invest or commit to systemic changes that would boost women's control over land and its production. Given women's perceptions of the value of land, it is especially critical to maintain a high momentum in building rural women's collective agency – particularly since governments rarely have the inclination to support disempowered groups. Communities have learned that in order to bring about change, there needs to be a collective force, a 'critical mass' of people working together to achieve it. Disenfranchised and historically subordinated groups need to be engaged in political processes through a combination of representative and deliberative institutions.

Within the broader framework of peasant land rights, the voices of women need to be amplified, not only in determining what their priorities are, but in supporting their active management of, and decision-making about, production, storage and local marketing systems. At the same time, land rights movements need to encourage and support more women members to represent women's priorities and needs at local elections. Civil society organisations need to equip membership groups with skills and knowledge to enter public and political arenas at various levels.

### **Invest in women's social capital and knowledge**

Women's knowledge and self-confidence is multiplied when they learn to apply ideas and methods, including practical scientific farming and nutritional awareness, and can share such knowledge and awareness – this adds value to their community standing. It is also important that this is developed with the engagement and support of men in the community. Civil society and human rights organisations need to work with rural women and their representative organisations to build their social capital and collective voice to hold governments and investors to account. Investment in 'social capital' supports women's abilities to come together around a common goal and to build institutions that respond to their interests, as they define them.

#### **Deepen empowerment through social capital**

Social capital creates capacity for collective action that enables even smallholders to work together to overcome limitations of wealth, land size, and bargaining power. Social capital can be gauged by people's level of inclusion in networks and relationships, access to information, and their ability to process it. In many communities, it is the very poor or marginalised in particular who are excluded from actively participating in local collective action.

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63. World Bank (2012) *World Development Report 2012*

Secure access to land needs to be supported with dependable channels of information, training and awareness, including, for instance:

- information on farming methods: farmer's development programmes and land rights movements should focus on providing information for farmers on food sovereignty, promotion of food crops, sustainable agriculture, diversified cropping and mixed-farming systems
- governments should promote access to information for all marginalised communities with respect to agricultural policies and government schemes on agriculture. Local government units, such as Grama sabha in India, should be effectively used as forums for dissemination of information to the Dalit community.

Most of the women who participated in this study showed a willingness to share their experiences and continue updating their knowledge. Their perspectives and narratives should be translated and shared with other rural women's associations and land movements in order to strengthen solidarity among women and land advocacy groups.

### **Governments need to re-commit to food security policies and women's rights to land**

In countries where women play a central role in rural livelihoods, there is an important role for governments in facilitating coordination with civil society to protect the poor and to regulate and counter market-based exploitation.

Of immediate concern to *those women who currently do have secure claims to land*, the following recommendations are submitted:

a) *In the face of growing pressure for arable land*, existing land claims need to be protected, with proper surveys and documentation made accessible to the public. As part of gender-sensitive land reforms, national land audits and publicly accessible land registries should be established, and reinforced by community mapping programmes that engage women. Secure access to productive land and related natural resources is absolutely critical to people living in rural areas who depend on agriculture, livestock or forests for their livelihoods. It reduces their vulnerability to hunger and poverty, increases the likelihood of their investing in the land and in the sustainable management of their resources, and helps them to develop more equitable relations with the rest of society.

The UN **International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development** (IAASTD) produced the largest scientific study undertaken to date on farming methods and sustainability. It presented a consensus among the global scientific community that energy- and chemical-intensive agriculture is not suited to the challenges of the 21st century. The report argues that small-scale farmers using organic, agro-ecological methods of production offer a much better solution to meeting the world's growing food needs.

b) *In the face of industrialisation of agricultural production*, governments need to stipulate and commit the necessary budgetary support for rural investment models that increase local food production, improve

land stewardship, and contribute to ending poverty. The UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the central body of the global governance system for food and nutrition security, recommended in 2011 that governments and international organisations “ensure that agricultural policies and public investment give priority to food production and nutrition and increase the resilience of local and traditional food systems and biodiversity, with a focus on strengthening sustainable smallholder food production” (see box on IAASTD). Governments need to commit to policy changes that will promote water-harvesting farming methods and other small-scale water management practices to ensure that small-scale farming can be optimised (and not be entirely dependent on rains). Women’s cooperatives, community registries, seed banks and participatory plant-breeding systems are a few of the institutions that need substantial investment. This implies that policies should promote cultivation of food grains rather than directing farmers to grow more cash crops like cotton (with the required seeds, fertilisers and pesticide use that comes with commercial farming).

c) *In the face of growing privatisation of land holdings*, governments and land rights organisations need to consider alternative models of ownership that provide communities with land and natural resources held in trust for future generations (see box ‘Alternative models of ownership’). Customary laws may need to be strengthened to protect the interests of all women – and especially of widows and other vulnerable groups.

#### **Alternative models of ownership:**

Radical new solutions or the reappraisal of traditional systems could have positive implications for poor women. Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom argued that economic activity is not merely split between the alternatives of market and state but may be regulated by collective social activity. She introduced the term ‘common pool regimes’ (CPR) to categorise such forms of property. Her findings demonstrated that collective community ownership of resources by rural communities may foster the evolution and adaptation of sustainable resource systems. Ostrom challenged the assumption that common property is poorly managed unless it is regulated by government or privatised, and showed how individuals can work together to protect resources. This way of thinking sits at the heart of how pastoralists and rural women measure the value of natural capital – where the idea of private ownership of part or all of an ecosystem runs counter to communal access.

#### **Land tenure in Sierra Leone:**

According to a 2006 FAO report, “an overt effort to move toward freehold tenure in the rural areas is unwarranted at this time. Such an effort would by necessity be long-term, and if pressed, would involve considerable confrontation, opposition, and resistance over a range of issues – this is ill advised after a war. Significant opportunity exists with options for leasing and partnerships under a wide variety of arrangements that are likely to be achievable in the near-term.”

(d) *Of concern to women who have not yet claimed their land rights*, while recommendations are on a case-by-case basis and are highly contextualised for the countries involved in this study, the following recommendations stand:

- India needs to re-commit to implementing the Land Ceiling Act, redistribute fertile land to Dalit women and put in place simplified processes that enable them to claim their land rights. (The land reform process initiated in the post-independence period allocated land to only a few Dalit men who have since lost those allocations to other dominant communities through coercion, distortion, encroachment, etc. Now Dalit women are much more aware of their rights, but the state is not prepared or ready to meet their demands.)
- The government of Sierra Leone recently formulated and adopted a number of legislative instruments<sup>64</sup> and plans, including the National Gender Strategic Plan. Implementation, however, is progressing slowly due to the lack of technical and human resources. Rural women need to be made aware of the rights that they can claim, so that they can begin to make demands of the government. They also need to form stronger associations and begin to work with the men in their communities and the traditional chiefs to consider models of land tenure (drawing on examples from countries such as Mozambique). There is clearly a strong need for ‘legal literacy’ to inform women about new land legislation and their negotiated security within it. Landowning families need to be represented on the Land Commission, not only at national and provincial levels, but especially at district and town council levels.

### Opportunities for further research

While the evidence gathered in the three studies indicates clear trends, as well as imparting a better understanding of the relationship between women’s access to land and increased empowerment, the small sample size is a clear limitation of the research. There is certainly scope for a widening of this study through a greater number of participants and an examination of other countries.

This report has indicated that empowerment comes from having *used* the land accessed for production, rather than from simply having *access* to land. This important finding opens up various avenues for further research. In a similar respect, while it has been touched upon within this report, a more thorough analysis of the links between women’s access to land and their ability to fight hunger and withstand food crisis shocks would contribute greatly to current knowledge on women’s land rights and empowerment.

As a final note, Amartya Sen makes the case for societies to regard women less as passive recipients of help, or as property or secondary citizens requiring custodians, and more as dynamic promoters of social transformation, a view strongly supported by a body of evidence suggesting that the education, employment and ownership rights of women have a powerful influence on their ability to control their environment and contribute to economic development.<sup>65</sup> That influence is their empowerment.



**Women leaders** discuss the land issues in their community Bumpe, East Region, Sierra Leone.  
PHOTO: ANNIE THOMAS / ACTIONAID

64. The Local Government Act of 2004 provided an opportunity for the empowerment of rural women specifically. The local councils are mandated, through the ward committees, to promote all empowerment initiatives/programmes for rural women.

65. Sen, A (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press.

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**Olga, 29 and Estela 31**, discuss the issue of eviction in their community, INUP, Agua Calinte, Polochic, North Region, Guatemala.  
PHOTO: ESTELA JOCON / ACTIONAID

## **Annex I: Research concept – Links between land rights and women’s empowerment**

ActionAid is implementing a three-year women’s rights to land project with support from the European Commission in India, Sierra Leone and Guatemala with the overall objective of empowerment, improved living standards and dignity for poor and excluded women. The project aims at improving women’s access to and control over land as a strategy towards their empowerment and ability to fight hunger. In a broad context, it aims to contribute toward achieving Millennium Development Goals 1 (ending extreme poverty and hunger) and 3 (Gender equality and empowerment of women) and improving the living standards and wellbeing of the poorest and most marginalised women in the three countries. The project is being implemented through supporting women’s movements and groups of women farmers in the three countries in their work to help their members (Dalit women in India, indigenous women in Guatemala and women farmers living with HIV/AIDS in Sierra Leone) in their fight for improved access to and control over land. Concretely, the women will be able to participate in decision-making concerning land rights. Through the project, we have been raising awareness among women about their land rights and supporting their advocacy action to bring about changes to laws relating to land rights for women at national levels. Indeed, it is hoped that poor and excluded women influence national policy and legal frameworks to promote and protect women’s equal rights to land. National baseline studies have been carried out in all the three implementing countries.

This project contributes to ActionAid International’s quest to support and work with rural and marginalised women in the countries where we work to demand and enforce their rights to and control over land. For many years, our work on women’s rights to access, control and where appropriate, own land, has been based on the conviction that land is important not only as a place to grow food, or build a home, but also that women’s independent rights to land would empower them in many other ways and confer other rights. We would like to demonstrate this link more empirically. We will carry out participatory, qualitative research in all three countries. This being the second year of the project, we would like to establish the link between women’s independent access to and control over land resources, access to economic justice, and overall women’s empowerment. The aims of the research will be twofold:

### **a. Establish link between land rights and women’s empowerment broadly. We would like to establish**

- In what ways have independent access to and control over land empowered women?
- In which specific areas have women been empowered? Which rights?
- Through a selection of a few indicators, how can we measure this empowerment and enjoyment of rights?
- What are the women themselves saying?
- How far has their decision-making power increased within the family and outside the family?
- What can we ‘see’ on the ground as evidence of this enjoyment of rights and empowerment?

### **b. Establish the link between access to and control of land and the ability to withstand food crisis shocks/ability to fight hunger**

- Does secure and independent access to and control over land enhance women’s capacity to anticipate and manage the known risks related to food security?
- Is there evidence of enhanced flexibility for women to respond to any/most eventualities – e.g. shocks and stresses, challenges and opportunities?
- Are women better placed to embrace diversity in food production (systems, crop selection, etc) and diversification of skills, resources, assets and options and preparedness for predictable or likely events and change?
- Are the women better able to build on and make use of existing local knowledge and capacity through learning and innovation?

- Do secure tenure rights enhance women’s engagement in collective action building on a base of social and individual wellbeing and positivity?
- Is it helping to improve the general health status of all the family members, especially to decrease the malnourishment among children?

## Annex II: Research methodology, values measured through land-access lens

Adapting from the *Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)*, women’s empowerment is being measured through economic/material, household food security/nutrition and social capital indicators:

### Categories of indicators

<b>Food security and nutrition indicators</b>	<b>Indicator 1:</b> Control over personal food consumption decisions	<b>Indicator 2:</b> Control and choice over daily household food consumption	<b>Indicator 3:</b> Inputs into communal information on food, health, nutrition and farming practices	<b>Indicator 4:</b> Capacity to change production to food sovereignty decisions	<b>Indicator 5:</b> Overall ‘ladder question’ assessing overall food security status
<b>Social capital indicators</b>	<b>Indicator 1:</b> ‘Power Over/Control’: Control over personal decisions and mobility	<b>Indicator 2:</b> ‘Power To/Choice’: Household decision-making and domain-specific autonomy	<b>Indicator 3:</b> ‘Power From Within / Change’: Changing aspects in one’s life [Individual level] – perceived changes in self-worth	<b>Indicator 4:</b> ‘Power With/Community’: Changing aspects in one’s life [Communal level]	<b>Indicator 5:</b> Overall ‘ladder question’ assessing overall empowerment <sup>66</sup>
<b>Economic capital indicators</b>	<b>Indicator 1:</b> Individual land ownership, access and inheritance rights	<b>Indicator 2:</b> Access to jointly owned land and public commons	<b>Indicator 3:</b> Ability to leverage land rights for loans, savings, insurance and other financial instruments	<b>Indicator 4:</b> Ability to invest in communal enterprises	<b>Indicator 5:</b> ‘Ladder question’ assessing overall financial security

## Annex III: Field research summary findings

### Measuring empowerment: summary findings from Guatemala

#### A. Food security and nutrition indicators

##### 1. Control over personal food consumption and nutrition decisions

With one exception, all respondents had three meals a day. Prior to securing land access, six ate two times a day. When asked whether they had changed their diet in terms of nutrition, 19 had and six had not (four of them had lived in Mexico as refugees where they received an allocation of food equal to that consumed today). Women who responded affirmatively explained that they now eat more varied foods, including fresh herbs, eggs and fruit: “We produce our orchards.” Two of them indicated that by selling what they grow, they are able to buy in the market the food they do not produce.

66. Adapted from: [http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Missing\\_Dimensions\\_Shortlist\\_Empowerment\\_July09\\_en.pdf?cda6c1](http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Missing_Dimensions_Shortlist_Empowerment_July09_en.pdf?cda6c1)

When asked how often they shop at the food market, answers were as follows: one, twice a week; seven, once a week; seven, every 15 days; four, once a month; and five, rarely. One woman did not respond. Of the women interviewed, 76% responded that they decide what to eat by themselves, 24% do not, because they decide with their partner or older sons or daughters.

Questions about their health: 12 can choose what to eat, seven cannot. Twelve take vitamins when required, and 13 do not. About improving their own food consumption as an important member of their family, 20 women said yes (80%); the rest no (20%). Analysing this set of questions, it appears that even if most women decide about their food consumption, this does not necessarily indicate a feature of empowerment because it is a traditional role assigned in Guatemala. What does represent empowerment is the way they value what they produce and that makes them feel proud because they are able to contribute to healthy and fresh food access. It should be noted that while the women farmers interviewed recognised its importance only a third were able to follow a balanced diet.

## 2. Control and choice over daily household food consumption

When asked if they could satisfy the food requirements of all family members, two did not respond, two said no, and the other 21 said yes. Ten indicated that they did so only by producing crops and 11 through their farm work and other income (six with harvests and sales of its products, five with crops and wages of their husbands). Although 21 landowners said they satisfy food requirements, this contrasts with what they say they eat. Ten never consume milk or fish; 12 occasionally consume milk, meat, and fish; 14 eat meat and fish once a month.

When preparing food for the family, 15 respondents said they give importance to daughters and sons desires, six to all family desires, three say it “is my decision”, and one did not respond. Asked if they can increase or reduce expenses on food, 17 responded that they decide by themselves, five decide with their partner, one decides with her son, another who is single said, “My mother decides”, and the last one noted, “There is no money to buy anything.” Based on their responses, it appears that although their diet includes corn, beans, herbs, vegetables and fruit, the number of respondents who consume eggs (11) and meat (four) two or three times a week is low.

## 3. Inputs into communal information on food, health, nutrition and farming practices

Of the 25 farmers interviewed, 17 had participated in training related to sustainable agriculture; of the 17, 14 have had the opportunity to share in their community some experience related to food production. Commenting on how they felt about these activities, six said ‘excellent’, five ‘good’, and six ‘regular’. One said: “I am interested in these issues, but not everyone looks good when a woman talks about it”, another commented: “Not all people practise it.”

With respect to their ability to influence their organisation or community, 14 said they do, two did not respond. Equal responses were obtained by asking whether they had updated their knowledge on agricultural production. Responses were equally split when asked if they are able to participate in decision-making in their organisation or community about food, agricultural production, and health. As members of women’s organisations (Mamá Maquín and ASODEMNA) they had access to training in

a) Me today	b) Neighbours today	c) Me five years ago
3 (10)	1 (9)	1 (9)
2 (9)	1 (8)	2 (7)
7 (8)	2 (7)	4 (6)
6 (7)	3 (6)	5 (5)
1 (6)	6 (5)	3 (3)
1 (5)	3 (4)	1 (2)
	3 (2)	1 (1)
	1 (0)	3 (0)
Average 7.8	Average 4.8	Average 4.2
No answer (5)	No answer (5)	No answer (5)

sustainable agriculture. An important feature is that most of them had the opportunity to share lessons learned and update knowledge, although only 12 had some influence over decision-making in their community. In San Basilio, seven out of ten respondents said they had not received such training and had no ability to participate in decision-making about food or health issues.

#### **4. Capacity to change production to food sovereignty decisions**

Eighty percent of respondents practise traditional farming (corn, beans, chayote and herbs), and the management of native seeds. The rest grow and sell commercial coffee or cardamom for basic grains. Sixteen have incorporated new practices in order to produce food and avoid the use of chemicals. When asked if they have heard about food sovereignty, 16 answered yes and eight no, one did not reply. When they explained its meaning, 12 scored food crops and eating well, seven of them added employment and wages, livestock, breeding of fish. This indicates that there is congruence between implementing sustainable agriculture criteria and knowledge of food sovereignty (64%). It should be noted that most women who have not changed their practices in food production live in San Basilio and have not participated in training related to sustainable agriculture.

#### **5. Assessing overall food security status (ladder question)**

This assessment is linked to eating food that is healthy, adequate and culturally appropriate. Column A refers to individual self-assessment today compared with where they were five years ago (Column C) and where they perceive their neighbours to be today (Column B). The bracketed number represents the steps on a ladder with (10 being the highest). Of note, 12 interviewees considered themselves to be at the top rungs of the ladder (8, 9 and 10) compared with just one person five years ago.

### **B. Personal and social empowerment**

#### **6. Control over personal decisions and mobility**

More than half the respondents (18) were active in peasant organisation meetings or broader social movements. Prior to securing land access, only seven women had participated in such meetings or training opportunities. On decision-making and personal mobility, they are in full control of their religious choices (100%), but when it comes to rating their participation in their communities that percentage drops to 92% and drops further in the wider social movement (72%). That said, their training basically refers to family food production, and they do not have to travel far. No one mentioned other capacity-building like personal empowerment, women's rights, or mental health issues, etc.

Of the ten respondents of reproductive age living with their partner, four make family-planning decisions with their husbands; the remaining make these decisions independently. Although most said they take care of their health freely, only ten attend doctor's treatments, two said they do not go to the doctor because of lack of money and eight use home remedies and herbs to heal themselves.

It is important to point out that their sexual and reproductive health rights are not guaranteed, and none of the women interviewed mentioned anything about menopause, osteoporosis or Papanicolau (pap smear). Autonomy over their reproductive capacity or in demanding respect for their health rights as women is not high. These women have no access to public health centres that provide sexual and reproductive health services.

#### **7. Household decision-making and domain specific autonomy**

All the women maintained their authority in decision-making in the family and in the education and future of their children. Seventeen responded that they decided by themselves, five make decisions with their partner, three did not respond. When they specified the important decisions, the answers were quite different: sell

***“I had a problem with my uncles, because they did not want my grandmother to leave the land to me.”***

Farmer/landowner, Heidy Violeta  
Nájera Salazar

animals without consulting anybody, good counsel to their children, use family planning methods, “leave my violent husband and leave even my daughters”, “insist that my husband quit drinking”, being alone without a husband, the design of the house, buy land, participate as leader, “helping my sisters and brothers”. When asked if there is a link between access to land and personal autonomy, 17 answered in the affirmative, two said “I am a widow”, and “I won autonomy together with my husband”. Widows and single women (11) were free to make their own decisions.

### 8. Changing aspects in one’s life (individual level) and perceived changes in self-worth

Asked if their leadership qualities in addressing the land rights issues were linked with a gender perspective, 17 confirmed it and eight did not. When asked how they perceive themselves: seven responded as “powerful leader to fight”, three as an active participant, 13 as a landowner and farmer, two did not answer. The same tendency was confirmed by the question: What changes have you identified in yourself? Twelve women volunteered information on their advocacy struggles – an indication that their self-worth is also measured by their capacity to fight for change – two were activists on land issues, four on productive issues, four on women’s rights, one on “territorial defence against mining” and one on “community issues”.

Explaining changes in self-esteem, they said: “Keep walking, I knew nothing before”, “Now I feel calm”, “I am happy”, “I feel valued and I have rights”, “Freedom, before I was afraid to participate and to speak in public”, “I can claim what does not suit me”, “To know who I am”, “To sell what I want”, “I appreciate me and now I can say whatever I want because I have no partner”. Five women did not respond.

Asked how they perceive their strength now, ten said: improved capacity-building, eight said: active participation in decision-making, and seven: identify the space within the family. Other options mentioned: to be able to work on different issues, to understand more, “bring up my community”, “my leadership has been strengthened with training and exchange of experiences”.

### 9. Changing aspects in one’s life (community level)

In this area, 19 of 25 have had some involvement at community level, 16 have been consulted at community level, 15 have held talks with representatives of other communities, and 16 have proved their leadership eg in taking actions like road closures, protests and marches on commemorative dates, as well as talks regarding land conflicts and production projects. Some women gave more than one answer. When asked about their level of participation, only four said they participated as a leader (vice-president, regional coordinator, president of a group, “president of a women’s group”).

To evaluate themselves as a woman leader, activist or participant, responses are nine, four, and ten, respectively. Regarding knowledge about groups that defend land rights in their locality, only eight answered affirmatively.

a) Me today	b) Neighbours today	c) Me five years ago
8 (10)	1 (9)	1 (10)
3 (9)	4 (7)	2 (9)
5 (8)	3 (6)	2 (8)
3 (7)	7 (5)	3 (7)
1 (6)	1 (3)	2 (6)
-	3 (2)	4 (5)
		3 (4)
		1 (3)
		2 (0)
Average 8.7	Average 5.2	Average 5.6
No answer 5	No answer 6	No answer 5

Four have participated in self-help groups, and only one explained about the process: “I learned to value myself, now I’m not sick, I am a new person, I’m fine.” Over half the women (15) make decisions on land use and the type of crop they grow, while ten make joint decisions with their partner or sons. The majority (23) use land for food security.

#### **10. Self-rating overall empowerment (ladder question)**

This assessment is linked to overall women’s empowerment and personal decision-making and authority. Five years ago, only one participant rated herself at the top of the overall empowerment ‘ladder’. Today, that number has increased to eight. This is perhaps the biggest indication of self-perception of change in empowerment relative to others in the community. Taken as an average, 20 participants placed themselves somewhere between the 5th and 6th rung of the ladder five years ago, compared with a placement close to the 8th rung of the ladder five years later.

### **C. Economic empowerment**

#### **11. Individual land ownership, access and inheritance rights**

Of the 25 owners, a third (8) possess communal land, 11 are either owners or co-owners with FONTIERRAS; two purchased land privately; two inherited individual land; and two have no titles but both use and control land individually.

In San Carlos Alzatate, eight women possess land, inherited or purchased through an Indigenous Assembly agreement which extended rights to women to buy and sell land. Five year ago, traditional practices only recognised men as citizens, as they paid annual taxes and women did not.

The eight owners in San Basilio are women who occupied a farm<sup>67</sup> for three years (2001-2004). Representing members of landless families, they “endured hunger and thirst, stood up to pressure from the army and spent ten days in front of the Government Palace, suffering considerably”. In 2004 they were awarded land managed by FONTIERRAS. However, five of the women had to pay for their land titles twice due to internal conflicts and because council members were killed. Three currently do not have the financial resources to pay for their titles.

Four of the seven women from Ixcán returned to their communities, having lived as refugees in Mexico for between ten and 12 years. All shared a strong belief that owning land was a woman’s right and in the importance of forming alliances with other Mamá Maquín members. Other women’s groups and alliances operating in Guatemala are Negotiating Commission for Women’s Access to Land (2000), the Alliance for Rural Women (2003) and the Joint National Women Weaving Forces for Good Living (2012). They strongly criticise the new land grab that is taking place in different parts of the country by large landowners or local caudillos, and have participated in campaigns against the sale of plots of land (which would sit within Quadrant D of Figure 1).

Seventy-two percent of the women (18) indicated that the quality of the land was good, while six said it was average and one women rated the land as poor. All the women based their assessment of the quality of the land on agricultural yield, even with adequate amounts of all necessary input. For example, drought has not been a problem. Eighty percent (20) indicated that they farm two crops. All of the women indicated that they would leave land to their daughters. With one exception, all respondents reported that they faced challenges in the form of opposition from male leaders in their communities, difficulty in finding land to buy, accessing credit, and opposition from their brothers.

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67. According to farmers’ organisations, occupations of farms are a form of struggle, such as blockading roads. These forms of struggle are used after government authorities ignore peasant demands. Large landowners and public officials named them squatters.

### 12. Access to public goods and shared ownership

Twelve respondents agreed that common property exists in their community, but only in five instances was the land cultivated. When asked if they tried to gain access to community land for agricultural production, only four had requested seeds for drying and space for storage areas. In two instances women had the use of common property for drying seeds and for storage areas from neighbours, and in one instance from community authorities. It is evident that the Guatemalan women interviewed do not have access to public commons nor receive financial support from government programmes.

### 13. Ability to leverage land rights for loans, savings, insurance and other financial instruments

Although the land titles provided to the women recognise them as rightful owners or co-owners, no one has been able to obtain a loan against the value of the land. The comments included, “I have not had the need to do it”, or “I see it as a threat to losing my land”, or “I have no chance to do it because my property is very small.”

Insurance is not available to micro or small landowners in Guatemala and so no one held insurance cover. Only one farmer was able to save income earned from her harvest (the amount was not specified), while 11 earned enough to cover some expenses. The remaining 56% had not been able to save anything. While crop earnings were spent in different ways, the pattern that emerged was that money was reinvested in land, animals, personal study or their children.

With earnings from their crops, especially those who have inherited and purchased land, one paid for her own studies, and three paid for their children studies; two acquired more land; two obtained home appliances; one bought medicine, two bought animals and one built a room. Fifteen women agreed with the statement that being landowners or co-owners improved their financial position; however, it does not guarantee access to loans or other financial mechanisms. Five women did not agree with the statement, while five did not respond.

### 14. Ability to invest in community enterprises

There were four co-operatives but only two of the women landowners had participated in them several years ago. Opportunities to invest in community enterprises were not viable for the women interviewed as such enterprises did not exist in their communities.

### 15. Self-rating on economic empowerment (ladder question)

This assessment is linked to women’s economic and financial security. The table refers to: a) how they evaluate their economic empowerment; b) how they evaluate their neighbours; and c) how they compared five years ago.

a) Me today	b) Neighbours today	c) Me five years ago
9 (10)	1 (9)	1 (10)
1 (9)	2 (8)	2 (8)
4 (8)	4 (6)	1 (6)
1 (7)	4 (5)	4 (5)
1 (2)	1 (4)	2 (4)
	1 (3)	1 (3)
	3 (2)	1 (2)
		3 (0)
Average 8.7	Average 4.8	Average 4.2
No answer (9)	No answer (9)	No answer (10)

## D. Political empowerment

These questions gauge the potential for leadership and the influence of women in their communities. This section had the highest percentage of unanswered questions, possibly because the questionnaire was too long, women lost concentration, and some of their responses were not sustaining a clear reflection. They were silent and showed fatigue (or were they afraid?).

**16. Participation in political processes (different levels)**

Eight women participated politically at community and municipal levels, specifically by taking advantage of opportunities offered by organisations with which they are associated. Eleven participated at regional and national levels, and one at the international level. Eleven women expressed a sense of empowerment as a result of participating in various organised movements. Comments varied: “My self-esteem grew”, “I’m more relaxed”, “I have more courage” “...freedom for myself and other women”, “Women have a voice in the indigenous assembly”, and “Women’s groups make decisions.”

Land rights were promoted by 80% of the women (20) at local, regional and national levels through community organisations. Some of the organisations noted include: CUC, Kabawil, CNOC-Via Campesina, Mamá Maquín, CONAVIGUA, Uku’x’be, Alianza de Mujeres Rurales, Asamblea Indígena en San Carlos Alzatate, COMSCAL and ASODEMNA. Most of the women interviewed (20) are aware that their organisations promote land rights or participate in movements for land.

When asked, “Are you a member of a producers’ association?” only two members of Mamá Maquín and eight members of ASODEMNA said yes. Both groups promote food production in orchards. When asked “In what group would you like the opportunity to participate?” Only seven women answered, saying, for example: “with producers at municipal level,” “I would like to know more about vitamins”, sports, computing, operating municipal corporation, in a space that defends women’s land rights.<sup>68</sup>

**17. Ability to lead community forums/land rights movements**

Only a third of the respondents knew of the existence of land rights movements and only one woman had led such a movement. These two answers show a lack of ability to lead women’s land struggle. One-third of the women, all indigenous, did not answer questions related to public speaking. Of those that did respond, one-third felt comfortable or very comfortable speaking in public.

**18. Ability to lead community forums/land rights movements**

This indicator is closely associated with the right to access information, the freedom of inquiry and the freedom of expression. Close to half the women are uninformed with regards to public policies and agrarian issues. Still, seven have forwarded demands related to land; four have participated in land protests and in support of the adoption of a rural development law, including agricultural

a) Me today	b) Neighbours today	c) Me five years ago
4 (10)	1 (8)	1 (10)
1 (9)	2 (7)	2 (8)
4 (8)	3 (6)	2 (6)
1 (7)	4 (5)	4 (5)
1 (6)	1 (4)	1 (4)
	2 (3)	1 (3)
	1 (0)	1 (2)
		1 (0)
Average 8.2	Average 5	Average 5.1
No answer 11	No answer 11	No answer 12

68. All the women interviewed are members of an organisation: ASODEMNA (8), Mamá Maquín (7) and CUC (10). ASODEMNA and Mamá Maquín are women’s organisations. CUC is a peasant organisation. These organisations are concerned with:

- women’s access to land, dignity and participation
- women human rights
- sexual rights and gender equity
- international women commemorations; (March 8th, November 25th, etc)
- advocacy and citizen participation
- the defence of territory

CUC members are clearly disadvantaged, as only one member had the opportunity to visit another community to share experiences. Close to 60% of Mamá Maquín members have participated at various levels including municipal, provincial and national. ASODEMNA members have participated at both community and municipal level.

policy; seven have participated in Municipal Development Councils; and eight have participated in Community Development Councils.<sup>69</sup> This suggests that women can be conscious of their land claims without necessarily being informed of public policies related to agricultural issues. Important to note is that these women are making their demands heard in different public spaces (municipalities, central government and Congress) including their right to land access, territorial defence (not mining) and the approval of a law (including agricultural policy), as well as other demands (roads, schools, etc) on community and municipal development councils.

### 19. Participation through elections

The election issue was omitted because none of the questions were relevant to Guatemala, a country where voting is a right but not an obligation.

### 20. Self-assessment on political empowerment and participation (ladder question)

This assessment is linked to the process of empowerment in the public sphere. The table shows: a) refers to how they evaluate their current empowerment; b) how they rate their neighbours; and c) how they compared five years ago.

## Measuring empowerment : summary findings from India

### A. Food security and nutrition indicator

#### 1. Control over personal food consumption and nutrition decisions

Sixty percent of the women interviewed grow one crop in a year and 30% grow two crops. The reason for mono-cropping is that the nature of land used by the Dalit women is predominantly rain-fed, whether it is their own purchase or from the government. However, the women who accessed land feel that even this minimal possession of land guarantees them food compared to the landless situation they were in before. The findings of the data analysis and interviews with the women indicate that there is increasing dependence on the market for food as women lack the resources to grow enough food, despite their capabilities.

#### 2. Control and choice over daily household food consumption

In both states, women who have access to and control over land and its productivity are able to meet the food requirements of the family; 77% of women consume food adequately as per their need, 73% are able to meet the food requirement of their families. Those unable to meet their food requirement said this was mostly due to the unproductive nature of their land and lack of irrigation facilities. The remaining women who responded negatively on food consumption said this was due to unequal gender roles they adopted/ or were made to adopt (due to familial nurturing/pressure/notion of motherhood as a sacrificing character).

#### 3. Input into communal information on food, health, nutrition and farming practices

Of the women interviewed, 93% are part of members of land rights forums.<sup>70</sup> Two Dalit women (7%) interviewed in Tamil Nadu are not members of any land rights movements but play a key role in enforcing their land rights; 57% of the women interviewed are actively involved in the forums and influence forum decisions.

69. Article 1. The Development Council System is the primary means of participation for Mayan, Garifuna and Xinca and non-indigenous in governance to carry out the process of democratic development planning, taking into account principles of national unity, multi ethnic and multilingual Guatemalan nation. Article 14. Functions of Community Development Councils (COCODE) d. Promote policies, programs and projects to protect and promote comprehensive childhood, adolescence, youth and woman. *Councils Act Urban and Rural Development*. Decree 11-2002 of the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala. Guatemala, 2002

70. Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaipu promoted by IRDS in Tamil Nadu, Dalita Mahila Samakya Promoted by AARDIP and Jogini Vyavastha Vyathireka Portata Sanghatana (Forum against Jogini System) promoted by AASHRAY in Andhra Pradesh.

#### 4. Capacity to change production to food sovereignty decisions

The research indicates that Dalit women want to grow more food grains and use traditional farming practices to get nutritious food. V Muthulakshmi says, “If I work in the field, you people (research team) can eat, but if you work I cannot eat, that is the status of farming community. If more land is brought under cash crops then there is no food security for all of us. Hence, government should take measures to improve the fertility of land and bring more land under the cultivation of food crops.”

Ninety-three percent of the women are active members of land rights forums and also engage in food sovereignty issues in their community, as they own land. They also feel that possession of land has given them courage and social status in their own community and with other communities. The women who are members of land rights movements are more aware of food sovereignty issues than women who are not part of any forum. Similarly, knowledge of sustainable agriculture and collective farming is greater among those women who participate in forums.

#### 5. Ladder question – Assessing overall food security

- Twelve Dalit women having access to, control over and ownership of land, placed themselves in the 10th position of the ladder and four out of them had reached that position earlier than the five years.
- The average position of Dalit women from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh at present is 8th, the average position of the women's neighbours is 6th, and the average position five years earlier is also six.
- The lowest position marked by Dalit women, in the food security and nutrition indicator was 2nd, and two women have chosen this position. Polamma a differently abled woman who did not have access to land, and T Muthamma, a Devadasi woman who also lacks access to and control over land, also placed themselves in that position.

### B. Socio-cultural capital indicators

#### 6. Control over personal decisions and mobility

- 83% of women interviewed are able to take leadership within and outside their community. Land has been seen as social capital in the community, by the Dalit women, because land has historically been denied to the Dalit community, particularly women. Hence, possession of land has given women recognition in their community and also at inter-community level. Many women interviewed said that before they got land, they were not considered a social being at all.
- 83% of the women find time to promote their leadership qualities and attend capacity-building training.
- 80% of the women could take care of their health and treatment for ailments independently.
- Women who lack control and ownership of land could not make personal decisions or independently go out at will.

#### 7. Power to / choice: Household decision-making and domain specific autonomy

- 90% of women are able to take independent decisions at household level.
- 93% of women felt that their role in decision-making has been improved and there is better recognition within the family, and with spouse as they attained land rights.
- 83% of women see education for their children as their priority and independently take decisions on their children's education.

#### 8. Power from within/Change: Changing aspects in one's life

- Most of the women who have a very deep relationship with land and its productivity, said, “Land has given us a realisation of self-worth.”
- Women in control of productive land resources are more likely to be active in public forums compared to women who have mere access or tokenistic ownership.

### 9. Power with / community: Changing aspect in one's life (community level)

- 80% of the Dalit women interviewed have participated in community-level action. The women who did not have control over land could not participate in community activities.
- 63% of the women led community-level activities irrespective of their access to, control over and ownership of land. The remainder of the women either take active participation or are simply participants.

### 10. Ladder question – assessing overall empowerment

- 53% of Dalit women interviewed placed themselves in the 10th position with respect to the socio-cultural capital indicator; 27% of Dalit women interviewed felt they had been in the 10th position for more than five years.
- The average present position of Dalit women interviewed is 8th, the average position of neighbours of Dalit women at present is 6th, and the average position of Dalit women five years earlier is also 6th.
- B Rani, a Dalit Arunthathiyar woman, who has access to and control over wasteland, without ownership, has placed herself on the 1st step of the ladder, indicating that she lacks social capital.
- 73% of the women placed themselves on the 5th or higher steps of the socio-cultural capital ladder.

## C. Economic capital indicators

### 11. Individual land ownership, access and inheritance rights

Dalit women in Tamil Nadu have access to land only through market purchase, but in case of Andhra Pradesh most of the women got land through inheritance (which was accessed by their parents through government assignment) and also with the recent issue of assignments from the government. However, even in this, the women who have ownership of, control over and access to productive land are more independent than women who do not. Those women feel that the land assigned by the government should be given with necessary support for cultivation and inputs for agriculture rather than mere tokenistic ownership, which was accessed by many of their neighbours.

The women who purchased land through a market source consider land as financial security for their family and children. This is particularly more so in Tamil Nadu than Andhra Pradesh, as that is the state where there is increasing real estate business and urban growth. However, most of the women see land as an asset to provide food for themselves and their family, if it is productive land.

Of the women interviewed 77% responded that they prioritise the use of land for food security and 30% prioritised it as a security asset for family. Poverty and hunger being the major issue of the Dalit community, land has ensured food for Dalit families.

Eighty-three percent of the women are aware of the law of inheritance, 40% are sensitive to the land rights of their daughters being equal to their sons and 30% feel that sons have more stake in inheritance than daughters, as it is customary for daughters to receive only care and support from the parental family and sons will hold responsibility of household. Even in this regard, the women who are part of social movements and land rights forums are more sensitive to their daughters' land rights than women who are only participants in the forums.

### 12. Access to jointly owned land and public commons

- Except for two Dalit women, no other women have access to jointly owned land. Both of them have access to the land of their siblings and in-laws respectively and give a share of the yield to family members
- Exchange of labour among the landed women is predominant in Villupuram and Thiruvallur district. Women who own land will work for other women and in turn get labour for their land
- 80% of the women interviewed have access to common land for drying seeds and grazing cattle

- 20% of the women do not have access to common land, not because of any inter-communal issues, but due to distance to access the land
- Inter-communal clashes have been controlled to a greater extent in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as a result of stringent laws like SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and the intervention of Dalit political and social movements
- All the women interviewed are doing individual farming and there are no collective farming practices in the villages
- There are no policies or support from the state or other civil society organisations to initiate collective farming practices among Dalit women.

### **13. Ability to leverage land rights for loans, savings, insurance and other financial instruments**

Only 20% of the women interviewed used their land rights to get loans from financial institutions. All other women did not apply for any loan, mainly because they give priority to the land as a productive asset which yields food (as opposed to collateral for a loan). Sixty percent said they lacked ability to save money; 33% could save more than Rs.5,000rp per annum. Only 30% of the women interviewed said they have improved their financial status after gaining access to land. The remaining women who have access, control and ownership still strive towards subsistence.

### **14. Ability to invest in communal enterprises**

- In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, there is a lack communal enterprise among Dalit community. In Tamil Nadu, two Dalit women interviewed have expressed the collective enterprise established by them with their family members
- In Salem district, Jayam is involved in raising pigs along with some young people from her village. Each one of them have invested around Rs.1,00,000 to establish the piggery farm
- In Villupuram district, D Dhanalakshmi had established a brick kiln with her brothers. Each invested Rs.50,000/- which would double in one year after the sale of bricks.

### **15. Ladder question**

- Seven women interviewed have placed themselves at the highest position of in the economic capital ladder. Two of them have indicated that they had been in this position for more than five years
- Of the women interviewed, the average position on the economic capital ladder is 7th; the average position of neighbours is 5th; and the position of the women interviewed five years earlier was 5th.
- Two women have placed themselves in 1st position, considering their economic status.

## **D. Political empowerment indicator**

### **16. Participation on political process at local / regional / state level**

- The women who have access to, control over and ownership of land are more politically aware of their own and other women's status in the community, compared to women who lack any one of the above
- 70% of the women interviewed are members of land rights forums in their respective states and 63% take active part in the policy-making process
- None of the Dalit women interviewed are members of any farmers' forum at local, regional or state level
- 80% of the women interviewed are members of women's self-help groups.

### **17. Ability to lead community forums / land rights movements**

- Women engaged with women's forums, land rights forums and other civil society interventions are more articulate in their political engagement particularly with local government
- 57% of the women have the ability to lead community forums and feel very comfortable speaking up in public to voice basic needs of their community, ensure payment of wages and protest against the misbehaviour of the authorities

- 30% of the women interviewed said they are not comfortable leading a forum or speaking in public on any issue.

#### 18. Ability to influence the policy makers / local governance and law enforcement authorities

- Only 37% of the women interviewed are aware of issues of the farmers and government policies affecting the lives of farmers
- 33% of the women interviewed have forwarded their demands to government for policy changes.

#### 19. Governance participation through contest in election

- 60% of the women interviewed expressed their willingness to stand in local elections. They indicated that support from the forum and their own community would encourage them to do so
- 13% of the women interviewed had already stood for election for ward member and panchayat president but were not elected.

#### 20. Ladder question

- 11 women placed themselves at the highest position of the political empowerment ladder. Four felt that they had been in that position five years earlier.
- The average position of women interviewed at present is 7th, compared to five years ago; the average position of neighbours is still at 5th.



**Hilda Grauela, 43, Romelia, 8, Explains to her daughter** about different types of corn standing near her house in La Cumbre Community, Tactic DV, North Region, Guatemala.  
PHOTO: ANNIE THOMAS / ACTIONAID

## Measuring empowerment – survey findings from Sierra Leone

### A. Food security and nutrition

#### 1. Control over personal food consumption and nutrition decisions

Ten respondents each from Bo, Kambia and Tonkolili had one daily meal before they secured land, nine respondents from Moyamba, eight from Bombali and six from Freetown also indicated the same. However, two respondents from Bombali, two from Freetown and one from Moyamba stated that they sometimes had two meals a day before they had a piece of land. Having land made some difference in the number of meals they have per day. The ten respondents in Kambia, six in Freetown, five in Bo and Bombali, three in Moyamba and two in Tonkolili districts respectively indicated that they now have two meals per day, 32 still live on one meal per day. Some of the reasons given for the latter were that the family was too large for them to offer more than a meal and farm yields are going towards health care, schooling for children and other family support.

The responses from the 26 women living with HIV was a bit difficult to place as most of them initially stated that they don't have access to land, although on further probing, they indicated they had access to land through their spouse but now that their husbands are dead, they have been left landless. The difference land access articulated in their response was based on what used to happen. For example, a woman living with HIV in Bombali indicated that her life was better when the husband was alive, but when he died she lost all the property including the land that used to earn the family income for proper meals.

One of the women living with HIV in Moyamba district said, "I eat only once a day because that is all I can afford since I have no means of farming and no property that will earn me income; I have been depending on food from World Food Programme and family members." The nutritional status of 24 respondents improved due to yields from the land and that of two respondents (women living with HIV) due to dietary changes. The majority sell the food they grow on a very small scale to purchase staple food, including fish and palm oil. All of them reported going to the market on a daily basis to purchase food.

All 58 respondents indicated that there are no barriers to consuming food considered good for their health. Those with access to land, however, found it relatively easier to access fresh food. They also felt generally in control of their eating choices, and were puzzled as to the need for supplementary nutrition. All 58 respondents indicated an interest in and desire to improve food consumption for themselves and family members – although this remains a challenge, as what is produced from the land affords them little purchasing power.

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***"Five years ago, at least I was above the fifth step of the ladder when I had access and control over my husband's land, our land."***

Woman living with HIV, Tonkolili,  
Sierra Leone

.....

The nutritional status of 24 respondents has improved as a direct result of the use of land, either because of an increase in the number of meals or because they are eating a more balanced diet. It was concluded that while there is no recognised barrier in terms of quantity of food consumed, they had a limited understanding of what a healthy and nutritious diet might comprise.

Most of the women interviewed were still on the 5th step of the ladder on access to food security. This was worse for one of the women living with HIV in Tonkolili who said,; "I only had access to land when my husband was still alive but since his death, life became worse. I can hardly eat a daily meal, even though the family members of my husband are farming on ... our land. I am below the five steps of the ladder and this has been the case for most of the widows in the communities."

## 2. Control and choice over daily household food consumption

All respondents indicated that they are never in the position to satisfy the food requirements of their families primarily because there is not enough money to serve large families. Others indicated that they don't have access to land and there is limited income from their small businesses. This has led to them depending on only one daily meal. Access to land also has made no significant change to their eating habits. They could eat the fruits from the gardens but at the end of the day, they buy staple food from the market. Almost all the respondents stated that in terms of frequency of food consumed, rice is what they eat every day and the majority indicated that they eat more fish during the fishing season in their respective communities. Harvested seasonal fruits make up part of their daily diet. Eggs were considered an expensive delicacy. One of the women living with HIV in Kambia stated, "I wish I could afford eggs for some of my meals but even money to buy a cup of rice is challenging, let alone to buy eggs." In terms of decision-making on who gets food priority in the family, women in married households agreed that husbands and children had top priority.

## 3. Inputs into communal information on food, health, nutrition and farming practices

Nine respondents indicated that they are members of farmers cooperatives (forums) at village level, four are in women's forum at union level, while 45 of them do not belong to any of the forums.



**Vijaya, 50, Sakundala 63 and Lakshmi 53.** Vijaya is working in her own field of paddy with other women, Senji vialge, Vlluram district, Tamil Nadu, India, where she does organic farming very successfully.  
PHOTO: ANNIE THOMAS / ACTIONAID

The farmers' group members indicated that they had received some training on improved farming techniques supported by Ministry of Agriculture, four (mainly women living with HIV) belong to a support group and received training from ActionAid on positive living, including nutritional information relevant to their HIV status. The training for both groups provided them with opportunities to add concerns of their peers onto the community development agenda. For example, one of the women living with HIV stated that, "I almost gave up on food because I vomited whatever I ate. But now that I have realised the importance of different food intake and portions/frequency that will sustain my nutritional and health, I will also pass on the information to my support group members faced with similar situation."

Forty-two respondents indicated that they do not have the opportunity to share their experiences of farming practices, health and food in their communities, whilst 16 did have that opportunity. For those that had the opportunities, the majority indicated that they felt good about being able to participate. This was recognised by most of the community members and gave them feeling of empowerment and improved self-esteem.

In terms of income-generating activities, almost all the participants indicated that they lacked decision-making powers. They accept whatever is being offered to them. The women living with HIV in Kambia districts said that social stigma most times limit their confidence to participate even in decision-making discussions affecting their own empowerment and living. As a result, they have fewer income-generating opportunities, although one woman said that she was above stigma and willing to participate any time the opportunity arose.

Thirty-four respondents indicated that they have a few opportunities to update their knowledge on food, health, agriculture for development and communal participation through radio programmes, workshops and community meetings organised by NGOs. Those who are in farmers' and women's forums said they can effectively participate in food security and health-related decisions, which sometimes form part of the forums' discussions. Sixteen women expressed confidence in the influence they have had on the forum. They felt their suggestions are often taken into consideration when decisions are being made in the forums. One of the women living with HIV in Kambia district indicated that the only opportunity she had to participate in a forum that enhanced her knowledge on food, health and agriculture was through a workshop organised by ActionAid and she used that information to educate the other members of her support group.

#### **4. Capacity to change production to food sovereignty decisions**

Food sovereignty for almost all of the women interviewed is about cultivation of food crops, fishing and livestock raising, which is what most of them are engaged in; however, they were not familiar with the term or its meaning.

#### **5. Assessing overall food security status (ladder question).**

The ladder presented five steps on which women could place themselves in terms of their general food security and nutrition status as a reflection of empowerment. They were asked to similarly place their neighbours and women in the community who own land now and five years earlier.

### **B. Women's empowerment**

#### **6. Control over personal decisions and mobility**

The practice of cultural rituals goes through a socialisation process in Sierra Leone and all respondents indicated they never practise these independently. Sixteen participants indicated having attended workshops organised by ActionAid; 32 said they learned about land issues through radio discussion programmes. Respondents with land indicated that they secured land not because they attended capacity-building sessions but because they had money to pay for the land. Over 20 of the respondents indicated that they took decisions on family planning but without the knowledge of their spouses, five women indicated that they had consultations with their spouses and decisions were reached, but the remaining 33 said they have never taken such decisions. All 58 respondents said that sensitisation programmes produced by NGOs such as AAISL had raised their awareness of women's rights issues. This had put them in a position to resist injustice and support each other by reporting violence cases to the Family Support Unit of the police. Those with land access stated that they feel very confident about their dignity in society; those without were sad about the situation.

One married, educated woman indicated that she was on the 8th step of the ladder because she has the knowledge to make decisions on sexual and reproductive health issues, like using contraception. Five years ago, she and her neighbours were on the 2nd step of the ladder.



**Women leaders from Adoni**, have a group discussion in the training centre, on the awareness building they do in their communities, Adoni, Andhra Pradesh, India.  
PHOTO: KALPANA SATHISH / ACTIONAID

### 7. Household decision-making and domain specific autonomy

Of the 58 women interviewed, 33 respondents indicated that they contribute to family decision-making; 34 said they often take part in decisions about the education and future of their children; and 24 reported not participating. Three said they had taken a decision in their families, one major one was to build a house in her name, although the land belonged to the family. None of them indicated having any autonomous decision-making powers in these domains of health, recreation or culture, which surely does not allow independent decisions on family celebrations or participating in village festivals. Only a few, particularly from Western area, indicated that they have some form of autonomy in decisions taken in the family; they think it is associated to their ownership of property such as land. All the others were not certain about the link between land ownership and autonomy, and expressed the view that their way of life is structured by social norms. A married woman in Moyamba said, “I will never say no to my husband when he wants sex from me because he will chase me out of his house and my family members will not accept me either.” This also applied to the unmarried women who expressed similar sentiments.

### 8. Changing aspects in one’s life (individual level) perceived changes in self-worth.

Information on leadership qualities was relatively weak. None of the 58 respondents mentioned spending time to learn new concepts to promote their leadership qualities or socialisation process. Only 16 respondents indicated that they sometimes go to farmers’ forum meetings. In terms of self-esteem, those with land indicated that they now do not depend entirely on others to determine what happens in their lives. They feel recognised in their communities, which makes them feel strong and confident about participating in both community and family decision-making.

### 9. Changing aspects in one's life (community level)

Only about 28 out of 58 women interviewed have had the opportunity to be involved in some form of community programme, most of which are set up in farmers' groups and HIV support groups. They all reported being involved in community sensitisation on HIV prevention and some are involved in condom promotion. Most of them had very little to say about land rights, as they consider it impossible to acquire land in their respective areas. Some indicated having access to land, but ownership as a right was felt strongly to be a challenge, particularly in Tonkolili and Bombali districts.

### 10. Assessing overall empowerment (ladder question)

Women's positions on the ladder of social capital indicates that some are active in decision-making at family and community level but do not have the autonomy to take independent decisions.

## C. Economic empowerment

### 11. Individual land ownership, access and inheritance rights

Almost all the 58 respondents interviewed have had access to land in some form; however, 18 of them lost the land due to the death of their husbands and the majority of these individuals are women living with HIV. Most of the land women owned was either through inheritance (63.3%) or purchase (31.6%). Five percent obtained land through other unspecified means. Kambia and Bombali recorded higher percentages of land acquired through inheritance (90% and 80% respectively). Only about 30% of women have private title deeds. Of these, 60% are in Freetown, Bo and Tonkolili where 50% of land owned is through purchase. Most of the women (70%) reported having family title deeds. It is evident that most women who acquired land through inheritance do not have individual title deeds. This has to do with the land tenure system in the rural areas where land is family or communally owned.

### 12. Access to public goods and shared ownership

The women in the farmers' groups reported having access to land for their cooperative and some small token is paid to the chiefs for using it. Access to this community property is, however, restricted to those who can afford to pay for it, leaving most women very deprived and in a situation of entrenched poverty, since most of them rely on small-scale farming for their daily sustenance.

### 13. Ability to leverage land rights for loans, savings, insurance and other financial instruments

None of the respondents accessed loans or external financial help as a direct result of owning land.

### 14. Ability to invest in community enterprises

No information available.

### 15. Self-rating on economic empowerment (ladder question)

The rating was 8th for women interviewed in Western area, 6th in Bo and Moymaba, and 5th in Kambia, Bombali and Tonkolili districts respectively. Similar sentiments were expressed for the neighbours.

## D. Political women's empowerment.

### 16. Participation in political processes (different levels)

All 58 respondents interviewed indicated no experience or interest in political participation and it was therefore concluded that the rest of the questions are not applicable to them.

### 17. Ability to lead community forums/land rights movements

Only Western area responded to this question, as the HIV support group indicated that they have partici-

pated in discussions on land rights in meetings organised by ActionAid or Oxfam GB. The leader of the group indicated that she has highlighted the situation of widows losing their property, particularly land to family members of their deceased spouse.

**18. Ability to influence the policy makers/local governance and law enforcement authorities.**

Only 18 respondents indicated that they know about the local government act of 2004 but feel somehow limited in engaging directly on policy dialogues. They feel uncertain about their ability to influence the policy makers.

**19. Participation through elections**

Women's participation in elections was limited to attending campaign rallies and voting. None had stood for electoral positions so far.

**20. Self-rating on their empowerment in political participation (ladder question)**

Overall, self-rating on political empowerment placed the respondents quite low, on the 2nd step.



**Women leaders India**, in the streets of Thirukovilur in the midst of a protest, shouting slogans to get their Panchami land back, Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu, India.  
PHOTO: JACINTHA CHITRA/ACTIONAID

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- i Imagine a ten-step ladder, where on the bottom, the first step, stand people who are completely without free choice and control over the way their lives turn out, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand those with the most free choice and control over their lives. In this context, we ask you to answer the following questions:
- On which step are you today?
  - On which step are most of your neighbours today?
  - On which step were you five years ago?

**ActionAid** is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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NANCY ABU, 32  
YEARS, FROM LUWOMA  
COMMUNITY, GBENSEH  
CHIEFDOM, EAST  
REGION, SIERRA LEONE.