

Stripping of Land from Rural Widows Confirmed in Zambia



“Broad-based empirical information about real-world conditions facing rural households is helping formulate more effective outreach programs and community dialogue messages for individuals and local leaders to improve the economic outlook for all households, especially those affected with HIV/AIDS deaths”

Notes from meeting between Lilian Chigona (PANOS Institute Regional HIV/AIDS Officer) and Anthony Chapoto, (FSRP Researcher) discussing the development of radio outreach program materials drawing on study findings

Zambian small farmer informing researchers about household effects of prime-age adult deaths and other socio-economic characteristics

Zambian concerns about widow losses of land from HIV/AIDS spouse deaths and negative effects on rural household well being are confirmed in nation-wide rural survey

Challenge: Rural income growth for African smallholder farmers is the foundation for improved welfare. In areas of Africa hard hit by HIV/AIDS, there are growing concerns that many women lose access to land after the death of their husbands. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has substantially increased the number of widow-headed households in Zambia and as well as all areas of Africa hardest hit by the pandemic. Nationally representative rural survey data in Zambia show that the number of widow headed households rose from 9.4 % to 12.3% between 2001 and 2004.

Many narratives and qualitative studies highlight gender inequalities in property rights and the difficulties that widows face in retaining as well as expanding access to land after the death of their husbands. HIV/AIDS has undoubtedly exacerbated such problems.

However, to date, there is virtually no quantitative evidence on the proportion of widows who lose their land after the death of their husbands, whether they lose all or part of that land, and

whether certain characteristics of the widow, her deceased husband, and/or her household influence the likelihood of her losing land rights.

Because the number of widows is growing rapidly in areas hard hit by HIV/AIDS, there is an urgent need to understand the magnitude of the problem and the degree to which it is exacerbating rural poverty.

Initiative: USAID and Swedish SIDA support the Food Security Research Project (FSRP) that has conducted collaborative studies with the Zambian Central Statistical Office, using nationally representative panel data of 5,342 rural households in Zambia, surveyed in 2001 and 2004. The objective is to measure changes in landholding size and other socio-economic conditions in order to better inform policy and program deliberations to raise rural sector productivity and income.

The panel of information from two periods is instrumental to assess conditions among households becoming widow-headed after 2001. FSRP is also collaborating with The PANOS Institute Southern Africa that stimulates public policy debate, and with other organizations in Zambia to utilize these empirical findings to help formulate more effective outreach programs for households and community leaders, as well as for national policy makers.

Results: Results indicate that within 1 to 3 years after the death of their husbands, widow-headed households, on average, controlled 35 percent less land than what they had prior to their husband's death. There is major variation around this mean, with roughly a third of widow-headed households controlling less than 50 percent of their former land, while over a quarter of widows actually controlled as much or even more land than while their husbands were alive.

Factors associated with a relatively large loss in land include the household's wealth prior to the husband's death, the widow's family relationship to the local headman, and the widow's age. The view that widows and their dependents face greater livelihood risks in the era of HIV/AIDS is indeed supported by nationally-representative survey results from Zambia.

Efforts to safeguard widows' rights to land through land tenure innovations involving community authorities may be an important component of broad-based poverty alleviation, social protection, and HIV/AIDS mitigation strategies.

The findings show the influence of local traditional authorities in affecting the extent to which widows are able to retain land. Government decrees appear to have little impact if local community authorities are not part of the agreement.

But certainly, national governments, donors, and NGOs have an important role to play in developing programs to work with local authorities to protect widows and children against property grabbing by relatives of the deceased as well as to institute property rights that are more compatible with social protection and anti-poverty objectives in the era of AIDS.