

## POLICY SYNTHESIS

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## SECURITY OF WIDOWS' ACCESS TO LAND IN THE ERA OF HIV/AIDS: PANEL SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM ZAMBIA

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### Main Points

1. The percentage of households that are headed by widows in rural Zambia increased from 9.4 % to 12.3% between 2001 and 2004.
2. 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.
3. To some extent, older widows are protected against loss of land compared to younger widows.
4. Women in relatively wealthy households are particularly vulnerable to losing land after the death of their husbands.
5. Widows whose family has kinship ties to the village authorities are less likely to face a severe decline in landholding size after the death of their husbands.
6. Widows in patrilineal and matrilineal villages are equally likely to lose their rights to land.

**BACKGROUND:** Beyond the obvious catastrophic effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on mortality, demographic changes, and the suffering of individuals and their families, we are still only learning about the complex longer-term effects of the pandemic on poverty and vulnerability. For example, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has substantially increased the number of widow-headed households in Africa, but we do not yet have a good understanding of the impacts of such increases. Using nationally representative rural survey data in Zambia we find 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 access to land after the death of their husbands (e.g. Aliber and Walker, 2006; Kajoba, 2006; Shezongo-Macmillan, 2005; Mutangadura, 2004; UNECA, 2003; Machina, 2002; Keller, 2000; WLSA, 1997). 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.

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. Such information may have important implications for poverty alleviation programs. For example, if widow-headed households constitute a relatively large group whose ability to retain and cultivate land is imperiled, then this would suggest the need for much greater attention to gender issues underlying local institutions and property rights as part of comprehensive rural poverty reduction programs.

**OBJECTIVES:** This study has three objectives: *first*, to assess how households' land access is affected after the death of the male household head (and headed by a widow) compared to households not incurring mortality; *second*, to determine the characteristics that influence the extent to which widows lose their access to land; and finally to identify implications for

social protection of widows, poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS mitigation strategies.

**METHODS AND DATA:** The study uses nationally-representative longitudinal data on 5,420 rural farm households in Zambia to measure changes in landholding size (sum of cropped and fallow land) among households becoming widow-headed after 2001. The survey was carried out by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MACO) and Michigan State University’s Food Security Research Project in May 2001 and May 2004.

The study measures changes in landholding size among households becoming widow-headed after the death of the husband, compared to households not experiencing mortality or chronic illness. Using a household fixed-effects model, we are able to estimate the changes in landholding size over time between the affected group (households with death of male head and now headed by the widow) and the control group (household without prime-age death) after controlling for other factors likely to affect changes in landholding size.

The longitudinal survey data contains a rich set of information on individual kinship ties, the length of settlement of the household in the village, whether the village is matrilineal or patrilineal, and other retrospective information not commonly collected in economic surveys. The econometric approach employed enables us to understand how these other factors influence the degree to which widow-headed households experience a decline in landholding size.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:** This study highlights several findings:

*First*, landholding size between 2001 and 2004 declined among both afflicted and non-afflicted but declined most among households becoming widow headed (see Table 1, Column A).

*Second*, widow-headed households were least likely to increase their landholding size (Column B), most likely to experience a reduction in landholding size (Column C), and most likely to suffer a greater than 50% decline in landholding size (Column D). However, it is worth noting that more than 34.8 percent of widow-headed households were able to retain or increase the size of their landholding, indicating that the loss of land by widows and their dependents is far from universal. This leads us to ask whether there are some attributes of the widow, the household in which she resides, and/or the community that influence widows’ ability to retain land. To shed more light to this question the differential impact of initial household and widow characteristics on land access is examined.

*Third*, to some extent older women seem have some protection against loss of land compared to younger widows. For example, profiles 1 and 2 in Table 2 are identical in all characteristics except the age category of the widow. Landholding size declined by -29.9 percent for widows aged 50 and above, compared to -54.8 percent among households headed by a widow aged 16 to 38. This finding could reflect

**Table 1: Changes in Landholding Size by Household Type**

Household Type	Changes between May 2001 and May 2004			
	% change in landholding size	% of households that increased landholding size	% of households that reduced landholding size	% of households with more than 50% decline in landholding size
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
Non-afflicted	-12.7%	45.7	50.3	23.8
Other deaths (not widow headed)	-18.7%	40.6	52.7	23.6
Male head death (widow headed)	-39.3%	27.5	65.0	30.4

assumptions implicit in traditional land inheritance laws that younger women are more likely to remarry and gain access to the new husband’s land, thereby obviating her need to keep most of the deceased husband’s land. In contrast, older women are considered less likely to remarry and might have more “social capital” in the community that protects them from losing rights to land hence more likely to retain most (but not all) of the land formerly controlled by the deceased husband.

**Fourth**, the death of a male head of household appears to have a particularly severe effect on widow-headed households’ landholding size in households that were relatively well-off to begin with. Landholding size declines by an estimated 48.4 percent for the initially non-poor household, in contrast to only -11.9 percent for households that were poor to begin with (profiles 3 and 4 in Table 2). If widows and dependents coming from relatively well-off households are more vulnerable to losing land

after the loss of their husbands, then this would suggest the need to safeguard the interests of widows regardless of their initial economic status.

**Fifth**, widows whose family has kinship ties to the village authorities are less likely to face a severe decline in landholding size after the death of their husbands. Profile 5 and profile 6 in table 2 are identical in all characteristics except that in profile 6 the widow is related to the headman. Landholding size declines by 24.3 percent when the widow is related to the headman, and by 66.4 percent if not. This huge difference between these two profiles suggests that social and political capital, in particular the widow’s kinship ties to local authorities, play a crucial role in protecting her property and assets after her husband’s death. This finding implies that with the willingness and participation of community leadership, it may be possible to provide greater protection to widows more broadly.

**Table 2. Simulations of the Percent Change in Landholding Size Based on Specific Widow and Household Attributes**

Profile	Household Type	Age of widow	Wealth status	Children Age 6-14	Widow related to head	% change in landholding size
1	Widow headed	Age 16-38	mean	mean (2.23)	mean (0.10)	-54.8
2	Widow headed	Age 50 & above	mean	mean	mean	-29.9
3	Widow headed	Age 50 & above	Non-poor <sup>a</sup>	mean	mean	-48.4
4	Widow headed	Age 50 & above	Poor <sup>b</sup>	mean	mean	-11.9
5	Widow headed	Age 50 & above	Non-poor	90th percentile (5)	No	-66.4
6	Widow headed	Age 50 & above	Non-poor	90th percentile (5)	Yes	-24.3

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Non-poor refers to households is in the top half of the assets distribution. <sup>b</sup>Poor refers to households is in the bottom half of the assets distribution.

**Sixth**, contrary to the *a priori* expectation that widows living in matrilineal villages have some protection against loss of land, the results show that widows in patrilineal and matrilineal villages are equally likely to lose their rights to land. This finding is consistent with evidence from focus group interviews in predominately matrilineal northern Mozambique. Participants revealed that property rights violations were common occurrences, suggesting that the matrilineal customs offered little in the way of

protection against land tenure loss (Hendricks and Meagher, 2007).

**Seventh**, contrary to conventional wisdom, the decline in landholding size seems not to be associated with labor shortages. If the *ex ante* number of prime-aged adults in the household is used as an indicator of available household labor, one would expect an increase in the number of prime-age males and females in the family to mitigate the impact of male head mortality on the availability of family labor.

However, results of this study suggest this effect is not statistically significant and that contrary to *the a priori* expectation, the more adults there are in the household to begin with, the *greater* the loss of land after the male head passes away. This result indicates that the decline in landholding size observed in widow-headed households is probably not due to labor shortages but rather due to partial land inheritance by other family claimants after the death of the husband. In addition, if the decline in landholding size was due to severe labor or capital shortages among widow-headed households, then we would have expected the decline to be somewhat less among initially wealthy households, yet we find the opposite.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS:** The view that widows and their dependents in rural areas of Africa face greater livelihood risks in the era of HIV/AIDS is indeed supported by nationally-representative survey results in Zambia. The Poverty Reduction Strategies being conceived and implemented in Zambia and many other African countries may provide a vehicle for addressing property grabbing and widows' access to land and other productive assets. Efforts to safeguard widows' rights to land by mobilizing support among traditional authorities to better understand the social and economic impacts of existing land inheritance institutions may have high economic, social, and health payoffs.

Increased government commitment to ensure security of widows' access to land is another approach to safeguarding widows' access to land, but initial evaluations of government efforts provide mixed evidence (see Izumi, 2006). Government decrees will likely 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.

\*This *Policy Synthesis* is a condensed from an updated version of FSRP Working Paper 15 by the same name. The full working paper in PDF form may be downloaded from: [www.aec.msu.edu/agecon/fs2/zambia/index.htm](http://www.aec.msu.edu/agecon/fs2/zambia/index.htm).

Please e-mail [chapotoa@msu.edu](mailto:chapotoa@msu.edu) for the latest version of an updated manuscript which is under journal review.

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