



Land Inequality, Gender Land Disparity and Poverty in Rural Zimbabwe

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The context

Access to arable land is a crucial avenue for reducing poverty and hunger in poor countries (Erickson and Vollrath, 2016; Birdsall and Londoño, 1997). Over the past four decades, Zimbabwe redistributed vast quantities of arable land to the landless, women and poor communal farmers to reduce inequality. For instance, the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) was implemented in the early 2000s following a number of earlier land reforms. Yet, poverty and gender disparity in land ownership have continued to be noticeable (ZIMSTAT,

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2017). Although equality in land ownership has been identified as one of the main drivers of income equality and therefore poverty reduction in many poor countries, high income inequality and poverty in Zimbabwe remain a major concern despite the visible land redistribution policies. Reducing inequalities in both the economic and social spheres through inclusive growth is recognized as central to the improvement of the well-being of societies and therefore an obligation for the 2030 Agenda. Studies on gender and macroeconomics argue that improving equality in the economic sphere, such as equality in the means of production like land, will not only promote gender equality but will also significantly promote inclusive growth and reduce poverty (Tekwa and Adesina, 2018).

The problem

Land reforms such as the FTLRP promoted women by setting aside 20% quota to women beneficiaries to significantly reduce gender land disparity, improve consumption income and reduce poverty in female-headed households. In addition, regional poverty is expected to decline significantly if inequality in land ownership is resolved. However, gender land disparity is still visibly high and the 20% quota was never attained. For instance, despite these successive land reforms, the proportion of poor female-headed households in rural areas is significantly very high (above 60%). This study on which this policy brief is based therefore applied an econometric model (Regression Discontinuity Design) to investigate whether an increase in arable land for female-headed households will improve household consumption, income and reduce poverty, and estimated how much poverty would be alleviated if land redistribution policies reduce the level of land ownership inequality within regions. In addition, a descriptive assessment of land and gender disparities in land ownership was also carried out.

The skewed land distribution inherited by the Government at independence in 1980 instigated a land reform policy whose aim was to redistribute agricultural land to address the problems of inequality, poverty, household food security and indigenization of the national economy. A radical change in agrarian structure occurred during this period of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). About 170,000 households were allocated farms between the period 2000 and 2011. One of the major concerns regarding the FTLRP was the use of force to acquire land, which placed men at an advantage over women given their masculine differences. In addition, the customary law which recognizes women's weak position regarding land rights on customary land continued to disadvantage women despite the land reform. Although the Fast Track Land Reform Programme tried to provide for a 20% quota of women beneficiaries, land ownership disparity and poverty continue to be discernable.

Results

The study applied the 2017 household level data from the Poverty, Incomes, Consumption and Expenditure Survey (PICES) and the Agricultural Productivity Module (APM) collected by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT). The results reveal a gender gap in landownership and a higher level of land inequality among female-headed households. On average, female-headed households own 2.1 acres less of agricultural land than male-headed households. The plot size Gini coefficient for female-headed households (0.756) is larger than that of male-headed households (0.733). This means that 75.6% of the agricultural land under female-headed households is only owned by less than 25%. As a result, female-headed households have an average of US\$ 52.4 less monthly income than male-headed households. What is, however, revealing about the findings is that despite having less average income, female-headed households have a larger average monthly per capita consumption and lower food consumption poverty than male-headed households. The average monthly per capita consumption of US\$ 54.2 in female-headed households is US\$ 1.4 larger than that of male-headed households. This is an indication of different expenditure choices between female-headed and male-headed households. The implication is that female-headed households in rural areas tend to direct a larger share of their income towards food expenditure compared to male-headed households. This is important for policies that target nutrition and food security, as giving more land to women will promote household food consumption.

The findings demonstrate that the optimal land size for reducing poverty among women, given their limited agricultural capital, is three (3) acres in rural areas. Given that over 55% of female-headed households own an average of less than two (2) acres, the implication is that policies that only look at increasing arable land for women but paying less attention to the bottom group or those owning less than three (3) acres, will be ineffective in poverty alleviation. The results reveal that a transfer of arable land to women will only reduce poverty and promote equality if it targets women without land and those with less than three (3) acres. Spatially, poverty can be reduced by increasing the share of women owning arable land in regional districts. Increasing the proportion of women owning land in a district can substantially reduce the number of poor households in that district. For instance, increasing the proportion of women owning land by one unit will reduce the district's probability of being poor by 20%, using the upper poverty line, and by at least 30% using the lower poverty line.

Conclusion and policy implication

The results generally show that female-headed households in Zimbabwe have smaller pieces of agricultural land and lower incomes compared to male-headed households. The degree of land ownership inequality is also higher among female-headed households. However, they spend a larger share of their incomes on food expenditures. In addition, increasing land sizes for female-headed households with very small pieces of land and increasing the proportion of women owning agricultural land can significantly reduce poverty in rural areas.

The major policy implication of the findings is that any land redistribution policy aiming at achieving gender equality in land ownership and reducing poverty must pay attention to women at the lower end of plot size distribution. Interventions must not only target women but must be designed for disadvantaged women, in particular women without arable land in rural areas. There are substantial spillover benefits from addressing gender inequality in land ownership. The Government can, therefore, make substantial strides towards simultaneous achievement of SDG Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 8 on inclusive growth and Goal 1 on poverty elimination if land policies are designed to provide arable land to women without it, and to increase plot sizes for over 30% of women owning less than two (2) acres. In addition, since female-headed households prefer to allocate more income on food expenditures than male-headed households, policies that benefit women in agricultural land ownership can also translate into improved nutritional outcomes of rural households. Furthermore, the country's devolution policy can make significant strides in reducing district-level poverty if more women become owners of agricultural land.

References

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