

Women's Land Rights and COVID-19

Introduction

In the six months since the coronavirus began its global spread, more than 15 million people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and more than 600,000 have perished. Governments around the world have instituted lockdowns and shut down businesses. Entire industries have been devastated, notably travel, hospitality, and entertainment in the formal sector, and day labor and street and market vendors in the [informal sector](#). Overall, hundreds of millions of people worldwide have lost their livelihoods.

These facts are well known. But less documented are the various implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the land and property rights of billions of people around the world. This brief, inspired by and sourced heavily from the Land Portal's [Women's Housing and Land Rights and COVID-19](#) webinar and discussion series, spotlights a selection of these challenges, and provides suggestions for how they may be addressed.

The Challenge

The COVID-19 crisis threatens the lives and livelihoods of millions. As family members become ill or die, as work burdens increase, as [migrants return to rural areas](#), pressure on land—including women's land rights—rises. Major concerns include:

- Many women [rely on land as their main economic asset](#). However, few women formally own land and [40 percent of the world's economies](#) have laws that limit women's property rights. Forty-four [countries treat women less favorably](#) than men when it comes to inheriting property. Daughters who lose fathers may also [lose claims to inherit land](#) and so lose an opportunity to acquire assets they control.
- Discriminatory social norms make it difficult for women to exercise formal land and property rights. Although women regularly manage land and provide approximately 43 percent of the world's agricultural labor, [men are much more likely to control land](#) and the proceeds that come from using land. With less access to [extension services, agricultural inputs, and credit](#) as compared to men, women who lose husbands or sons face extra hurdles to becoming successful farmers. In some countries, [leaving fields fallow for too long](#) sets the stage for the loss of land, as fallow lands can be seen as underproductive and can be reallocated to someone else.

- [A recent survey](#) finds that as many as 480 million women feel their land and property rights are insecure. Married women, the survey finds, feel especially vulnerable to eviction after a husband's death or after divorce. If women lose husbands to COVID-19, [they run the risks of losing the land](#) they need to grow food crops or to provide shelter for their children. As women either get sick themselves or tend to sick family members, their ability to till, weed, and harvest crops and care for animals decreases. Secure land rights can help protect women from displacement, improve access to services and help them rebuild their lives after a crisis like a pandemic.

Early Responses and Key Considerations

IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

During the pandemic, governments and communities can take steps to reduce the land-related risks women face, namely:

- **Gather data on the specific impacts of the pandemic on women's land and housing rights:** Municipal, regional, and/or national governments can work with local organizations, including women's groups, to gather data about the specific impacts the pandemic is having on women's land and housing rights. This could take the form of rapid surveys to determine if women are being threatened with displacement, or are [being displaced or evicted](#), by family members or others (landlords, governments) when someone in the family falls ill. Governments and relief organizations could use data to improve the targeting of assistance and establish rapid response mechanisms to counter dispossession and eviction.
- **Enable access to services:** It is important that women be able to register land claims either jointly with spouses, family members or in collective groups, or as sole owners. But during the pandemic some governments have shut down land offices. To support women who wish to register claims, governments should consider keeping offices open and view them as essential services.
- **Be on the lookout for fraudulent transfers:** During lockdowns, officials should be trained to be on the lookout for fraudulent transactions that involve [women's land claims](#). When family members pass away or when women are not able

to travel to defend their rights, others with better access to land offices may file claims for women's land. The Tanzania Widows Association is working with COVID-19 widows and to help protect them from eviction and displacement by formalizing their land rights. The mobile application [Sheria Kiganjani](#) (Law on Your Palm) is providing Tanzanian women with access to free legal advice related to land—so they do not need to travel.

LONGER-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Medium to longer-term steps that can help reduce risks to women's land rights include:

- **Identify and address discriminatory gaps in the legal framework:** Governments can work with researchers and civil society to identify specific provisions of family laws, including inheritance and matrimonial laws, and other laws that [conflict with and weaken women's land rights](#) and propose new language to harmonize these laws.
- **Support women's collective farming and production opportunities:** When it becomes difficult for women to farm their land, because they are widows, have a sick husband or son, or are ill themselves, an important alternative can be [collective farming](#), which allows women to spread risks and share benefits. Legal frameworks should enable this voluntary approach, including by supporting equitable land leasing.

- **Close the digital gender divide to enable women to use online land platforms:** As more [land administration](#), agricultural extension and financial services move online, women can be left behind due to the digital gender divide. To protect women's land rights in those countries with online service platforms, governments can track data on women's secure access to and use of technology, promote digital literacy through schools and work with local NGOs, civil society organizations and women's groups, and create and [support safe, accessible public access facilities](#) for women to use the internet.
- **Activate men as allies to strengthen women's land rights:** In the longer term, to protect and promote women's land rights from the pressures associated with pandemics and other crises, it is [essential to engage with men and boys](#) to support social change that empower women and their families.

