

When Women Hold the Land, the Story of the Household Changes



Lacan kwo ki lwete VSLA group members in Unyama harvesting their vegetables

Land is one of those things people love to call cultural until a woman asks to own some. Then suddenly everyone remembers tradition, procedure, signatures, male authority, clan approval, and ten other obstacles dressed up as common sense. Gulu Women Economic Development & Globalization **GWED-G's** work cuts straight through that familiar theatre. The project understood that women's land rights are not some side issue to be politely discussed after development has happened. Land determines who produces food, who earns, who negotiates, who plans for the future, and who gets erased when property is being counted. So GWED-G set out to strengthen women's access to, use of, and ownership over land while also strengthening community-led indigenous food systems. That combination was smart. It tied rights to livelihood, and livelihood to dignity.

The early work focused on moving the conversation out of abstraction and into the places where power actually operates: communities, land committees, cultural institutions, radio, and women's own groups. Three sensitization campaigns addressed women's land, property, succession, and post-harvest rights. Three interface meetings connected women VSLA groups with sub-county land committees. Two radio talk shows amplified land rights advocacy. These were not ceremonial activities arranged to decorate a report. They were deliberate attempts to make women's claims legible in systems that had long preferred them silent, grateful, or absent from the paperwork.

The numbers show that something real moved. A total of 512 women participated in land rights advocacy meetings. Eighteen women registered land jointly with their spouses. Eight secured sole land titles, and three more applications were ongoing. Three hundred and twenty-seven women were confirmed to be managing land for farming or business, with 379 acres registered under women's ownership. Seven land disputes were resolved by trained women mediators, nine more through cultural leaders using alternative dispute resolution, and seven widows retained land through mediation and documentation support. These are not small wins. These are moments where women move from standing near power to holding documented authority inside it. That shift changes what can be planted, what can be borrowed against, what can be inherited, and what future a woman can imagine for herself and her children.

And GWED-G did something many rights-based interventions forget to do well: it made

rights useful in the eyes of the community. The project linked land ownership to productive livelihoods through seed banks, organic farming, market engagement, and financial inclusion. Two seed banks received signposts, three received packaging materials, and three received weighing scales, improving visibility, storage, record-keeping, and market readiness. Four hundred and two individuals accessed or borrowed seeds. One thousand four hundred and eighty households cultivated vegetables for home consumption and sale. Thirteen hotels, restaurants, and local markets were supplied with produce. Three hundred and sixty women adopted organic pesticide and fertilizer production. Seventeen women opened personal bank accounts. This is where the story gets deliciously difficult for patriarchy to ignore: when women control land, the land starts feeding households, serving markets, and generating income in ways people can see, count, and no longer dismiss as theoretical.





Source: @GWED-G –Interface meeting of the VSLA women group with the land committee in Laminowek, Loyoboo village on women land rights

There is also a quieter transformation running beneath the statistics. The report notes a noticeable shift toward inclusive land allocation, inheritance discussions, and joint decision-making within families. Cultural and clan leaders showed more progressive engagement. Women became more confident in reporting violations and using dispute resolution mechanisms. Monitoring visits to 13 VSLA groups confirmed that these were not one-off anecdotes crafted for applause. The changes were visible in land ownership, joint decision-making practices, and productive use of agricultural outputs. That matters because social change is often announced too early, usually after one workshop and a group photo. Here, the evidence suggests something sturdier: women's authority was becoming normalized in places where it had

previously been negotiated through fear, dependency, or silence.

The barriers were real and the report is honest about them. Customary norms still frame land as male-owned. Administrative processes remain costly and slow. Legal illiteracy still limits confidence for many women. But the project's response is what makes the story compelling. Rather than treating resistance as proof that the work was too difficult, GWED-G intensified engagement with cultural institutions and male leaders, promoted joint registration as family security, and used area land committees to guide communities through titling and Certificates of Customary Ownership. In other words, the project did not politely back away from the hard part. It walked further in.





Radio talk show on women land rights access and utilization on radio Rupiny, Gulu.

What emerges is a story bigger than land documents. It is a story about the rearrangement of power at household and community level. Women who were once expected to cultivate land without claiming it are now registering it, mediating disputes, growing food, supplying markets, opening bank accounts, and building economic credibility. The soil is still the soil. The seeds are still seeds. The vegetables are still vegetables. Yet when the hands planting them are backed by recognized rights, everything changes. The harvest becomes more than food. It becomes proof. Proof that women's land rights strengthen households, expand local economies, and make communities more just, more resilient, and far less comfortable with old excuses.

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