

ICRW Consultation on Women's Property and Inheritance Rights, Washington DC, 21 July 2006

In late July, a roundtable discussion on women's property and inheritance rights was organized by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), a non-governmental research organization focused on improving the lives of women in poverty and advancing equality, human rights and secure livelihoods. ICRW works in partnership with other organizations in research, capacity building and advocacy on issues that affect women's economic, health and social status in low- and middle-income countries. (For more information, see www.icrw.org)

The goal of this discussion was similar to the meeting that ILC and IDRC co-organized in Rome in May 2006, in that it sought to identify where there are gaps between research, programming and policy in consultation with other organizations and networks that are active in the field of women's land and property rights. I participated in this discussion to share the concerns and experiences of ILC network members, and to learn more about the work of other US-based organizations in this area for the purpose of further informing ILC's own strategy.

Overview by ICRW

ICRW opened the meeting by reviewing its own activities and assessment of where significant work is underway, and where there may be key gaps.

- In terms of **policy**, ICRW sees much significant being done on incorporating women's rights to property and inheritance into laws and state policies, including examples of reforms at the national levels.

Two key gaps are (a) implementation of these laws, particularly on ensuring that state budgets provide the tools and resources necessary, and (b) integrating these policy reforms with broader national strategies for poverty reduction and equitable growth.

- In the **research** field, much work is being done on what conditions are needed for women to accumulate assets, and how these allow for women's participation in production and markets. There is increasing focus on legal pluralism and tenure systems that can support women's secure access, particularly in the context of growing trend of privatization.

There is still a gap, however, on how customary tenure can be harmonized with state laws in ways that make women's rights secure, and on articulating the ways that secure property rights are contributing to women's empowerment. In addition, there is a need to differentiate via research the extent to which women are unable to gain access to assets

because of structural factors, versus those cases where having an asset base does allow women and women-headed households to recover from shocks.

- ICRW's **programming** includes small-grants that support testing and documenting strategies for women to claim their rights, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the global advocacy arena, ICRW is working with FAO as joint conveners on women and property rights for the UNAIDS commission.

One of ICRW's areas of interest for future programming is to develop gender-disaggregated indicators of progress toward equality in land rights, including measures of how effective policy reform is in practice. This would link up its program work with research and policy-oriented activities.

Points raised in discussion

This overview provided a basis for the participants to discuss and critique the assessment that ICRW put forth. One issue that several participants (including me) raised was the importance of identifying direct roles that community organizations can play in the kinds of activities that were described, particularly in the policy and research areas.

One participant from the Philippines described this as making it clear who "claims" indicators, for instance – relevant to making these exercises with empowerment as a goal. Others gave examples of "action research" initiatives, in which women are at the center of the research, and their role in activity design and use of study findings is built in as a central part of the work. ICRW was very receptive to this idea, and noted that it has extensive resources on participatory methodologies.

We also raised the importance of looking at women's rights in commons settings, which requires a more integrated look at not only rights to agricultural land, but also access rights to forests, water and other common-pool resources. Many participants recognized that these rights to the commons are being lost, particularly in cases where state and donor policies encourage privatization, and this trend often entrenches rural women in poverty. This expanded the focus of discussion from property and inheritance rights to concern over rights to land and natural resources more broadly.

Related to this, several participants identified a research gap in understanding what differences exist in terms of resource tenure, including patterns of control and ownership over productive assets, between men and women. While inheritance is an important issue in some countries, in other contexts women may face other greater challenges, such as evictions or violent conflicts related to

natural resource control. Research and policy work should bear out differences across countries and regions.

In terms of programs or practices, participants noted the need for more horizontal knowledge sharing, i.e., between and across networks of women who are active in their communities. Existing “knowledge” programs on women’s rights tend to be vertical (i.e., exchanges between donors and community associations) or horizontally among donors or international research institutions.

The role of social movements and rural people’s organizations – and particularly women’s associations – in improving women’s rights to land is an emerging research field. Several participants were interested in this issue, and whether/how it could identify ways to link programs to strengthen people’s organizations with advocacy efforts around women’s land and property rights.

Keeping in touch with participants

There were representatives from about 15 organizations participating in the meeting, including colleagues from IFPRI and IFAD from within the ILC network. In addition to ICRW, some other organizations that are worth keeping in contact include:

- Huairou Commission (NYC) – network of grassroots women’s organizations that grew out of NGO parallel forum to the 1995 UN summit in Beijing. Like ILC, Huairou both supports local organizing and links it with global processes, including UN-system forums. The commission has a campaign on women’s rights to land and housing, in partnership with UN-HABITAT. (www.huairou.org/campaigns/land/index.html for more information.)
- Human Rights Watch (NYC) – leasing US-based human rights watchdog, in recent years HRW has issued reports on women’s inheritance and property rights in Kenya and is now researching similar issues in other African countries. Through its women’s rights program, HRW links land and resource rights to other key human rights issues, such as access to HIV treatment and violence against women. (www.hrw.org/women/ for more information.)
- Women’s Land Link Africa (Ghana) - WLLA is a joint initiative by Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), the Huairou Commission, FAO and UN-HABITAT, which focuses on participatory research that links women’s empowerment to advocacy. Much of its program activities focus on monitoring and increasing access to justice system by women, as it relates to securing land rights. (www.wllaweb.org/index.php for more information.)

