

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

MASTER OF ARTS PROJECT PAPER

LAND OWNERSHIP AND CULTURAL PRACTICES AMONG THE RURAL
WOMEN HOUSEHOLD HEADS IN THE RWANDAN POST CONFLICT
RECONSTRUCTION: A CASE STUDY OF KINIGI DISTRICT OF RUHENGERI
PROVINCE, RWANDA

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A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN RURAL
SOCIOLOGY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
NAIROBI

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2003

ABSTRACT

It is unfortunate that discrimination over land ownership and use perpetuated by cultural beliefs and practices continue to prevail in our modern societies. This study aimed at identifying the impact of cultural practices on rural women household heads in Kinigi district of Ruhengeri Province in the Rwandan post conflict reconstruction.

Land ownership and use in Kinigi district differ substantially from other regions of Rwanda. The District is known for a traditional acceptance of polygamy, customary marriages and intense cultivation of the especially fertile soil. This acceptance of polygamy and customary marriages has brought about the problem of “illegitimate” women and children who do not have legal protection with regard to land ownership and use in the event of widowhood, separation or divorce.

This study attempted to generate some knowledge on the importance of women household heads in the process of socio-economic well being on rural communities in Rwanda. The survey method was used whereby 107 interview schedules were conducted among rural women household heads. The observation tool was also used in the area of activities that women household heads do. The scores were organized, coded, analyzed, interpreted and presented using tables containing frequencies, percentages and cross tabulation tables.

Feminist, capitalist and modernization theories have been employed by the study in order to explain the point of departure as to why some women household heads own and use land while others do not. The study's independent variables included respondents' personal characteristics such as age, educational background, occupation, marital status, marriage type, number of years of household headship, and the number of household members, as well as perceptions, awareness and willingness to participate in changing land ownership and use Laws. Dependent variables were land ownership and use.

Study findings show that personal characteristics of women household heads do not influence their land ownership and use. Importantly, women household heads' perceptions about land ownership and use as well as their willingness to participate in changing land ownership and use Laws have been found to be of less influence on their land ownership and use. Instead, only their awareness was observed to influence their land ownership and use.

Majority of respondents were aged below 35 years, accounting for 46.7%. This being an economically active group, lack of land ownership and use rights makes them unable to protect themselves and their families from unstable and violent domestic situations. A higher percentage of illiteracy (53.3%) among the rural women household heads was also revealed with the implication that these women have no capacity of looking for better alternative to their means of livelihood.

Importantly, 76.3% of customary marriages have brought about the problem of “illegitimate” women and children who do not have a legal protection with regard to land ownership and use in the event of widowhood, separation or divorce. Though 84 of the 107 respondents understood the importance of land ownership and use, their willingness to participate is hindered by the low level of awareness as far as land ownership and use laws are concerned. However, the major challenges to women household heads’ productivity included their stereotype, and lack of off-farm activities to provide them with an alternative to their economic means of livelihood. Farming land is unaffordable by the majority of women household heads and the culture continue to define the status of women in terms of low status as well as the laws and policies governing land ownership and use continue to be unclear.

Although the study used a small sample of 107 women household heads, the findings lead to recommendation as the need of women household heads’ awareness creation and reinforcement of Laws, policies and practices regarding land ownership and use. There is also need for further study in relation to the rural women household heads in order to make a break with the land and move into off-farm income earning activities.