

Original Article

The Influence of Legal Aid Services in Promoting Women's Awareness on Land Ownership Rights, A Case of Mufindi District-Tanzania

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Abstract

Guided by Property Rights Theory, this study assessed the influence of Legal Aid Services in promoting women's awareness of land ownership rights in Mufindi District, Tanzania. A cross-sectional research design was employed, involving a sample of 120 respondents selected through both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The credibility and dependability of qualitative data were ensured through detailed documentation of the research process. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS version 26.0, and the findings were presented in tables and charts, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically in line with the research questions and presented narratively. The findings reveal that the majority of community members perceive Legal Aid Services positively, noting that these services have contributed, to some extent, to increasing women's awareness of their equal rights to land ownership alongside men. The study further found that Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs) have enhanced women's confidence and motivation to assert and defend their land ownership rights. Women respondents particularly appreciated the role played by LAOs in empowering them with legal knowledge and support during land-related disputes. The study concludes that Legal Aid Services have made a significant contribution to promoting women's awareness and empowerment regarding land ownership rights in the study area. Based on the findings, the study recommends that the government subsidize the operations of LAOs. Such support would enable LAOs to adopt more effective and contextually appropriate strategies for raising awareness, especially in rural areas where most women reside and where current approaches have shown limited effectiveness.

Keywords

Legal Aid Services, Land Rights, Deprived Rural Women.

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1. Introduction

Women across the world continue to experience persistent socioeconomic disadvantages compared to men, particularly in relation to access to and control over productive resources such as land. Empirical evidence shows that women are disproportionately affected by poverty and resource deprivation, largely due to structural inequalities embedded in legal, cultural, and institutional frameworks (Nuri & Melese, 2020; Sharaunga et al., 2019). Globally, women account for nearly 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living on less than one US dollar per day, with approximately 60 percent living in conditions of extreme poverty (Mori, 2014; Kevela & Magali, 2022). In recognition of this disparity, scholars and development practitioners emphasize that meaningful poverty reduction cannot be achieved without deliberate investments in women's economic empowerment (Hillesland et al., 2022; Salia et al., 2017). One of the most effective pathways to women's economic empowerment is the promotion of secure access to and ownership of land. Land remains a critical productive asset, especially in developing countries where agriculture forms the backbone of rural livelihoods. Secure land tenure enhances women's ability to engage in income-generating activities, improves household food security, and enables women to access credit and financial services by using land as collateral (SIDA, 2015; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019; USAID, 2023). Moreover, women's land ownership has been associated with increased bargaining power within households, improved decision-making over resource use, and positive intergenerational outcomes, including better investments in children's education and

health (Harley et al., 2019).

Despite the acknowledged importance of land ownership, women remain significantly underrepresented among landowners globally. Recent estimates indicate that women constitute less than one-fifth of landowners worldwide (USAID, 2022). Even in contexts where women have access to land, such access is often insecure and characterized by smaller plot sizes, lower soil fertility, and limited control over land-use decisions (USAID, 2016). This disparity persists despite the fact that women contribute approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force and are responsible for between 60 and 80 percent of food production in developing countries (SIDA, 2015). The contradiction between women's contribution to agricultural production and their limited land ownership underscores deep-rooted gender inequalities within land tenure systems. Several factors contribute to women's limited ownership and control of land. These include low levels of education, limited awareness of statutory land rights, weak enforcement of gender-equitable laws, and the continued dominance of customary legal systems that often discriminate against women (Knox et al., 2016). Although many countries have enacted constitutions and land laws that guarantee gender equality, these formal provisions are frequently undermined by customary norms governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which tend to privilege men over women (SIDA, 2015; World Bank, 2022). As a result, women's land rights remain largely theoretical rather than practical.

In the African context, patriarchal traditions and customary practices play a particularly influential role in shaping land ownership patterns. In many societies, women are considered temporary members of their natal or marital families, thereby limiting their entitlement to land (TUMA, 2018). Cultural norms often dictate that land is inherited through male lineage, while women's access to land is mediated through male relatives such as fathers, husbands, or brothers (Olukayode, 2017). Consequently, even where legal frameworks exist to protect women's land rights, cultural resistance and social stigma continue to impede their effective realization. Recognizing these challenges, the international community has made significant efforts to promote women's land rights through various conventions, declarations, and development agendas. Key among these is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (1996), and the African Union's Maputo Protocol (2003). At the global level, Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasizes gender equality and explicitly recognizes women's land rights as a prerequisite for sustainable development (Harley et al., 2019). These frameworks call upon governments, civil society organizations, and development partners to strengthen legal protections and promote women's awareness and enforcement of land rights (Ndugwa et al., 2018).

One of the practical mechanisms adopted to operationalize these commitments is the use of Legal Aid Services (LASs). Legal Aid Services aim to expand access to justice by providing free legal education, advice, representation, and alternative dispute resolution to marginalized populations, particularly women facing discrimination in land and property matters (Valerie, 2021). Community paralegals and grassroots legal advocates play a critical role in translating complex legal provisions into accessible knowledge, mediating disputes, and empowering women to claim their rights. Evidence from countries such as Nepal, Burundi, India, Ghana, and Colombia demonstrate that Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs) have significantly contributed to improving women's land tenure security through joint land titling, legal clinics, and rights-based advocacy (Daley et al., 2013; USAID, 2023).

In Tanzania, the government has demonstrated commitment to promoting women's land rights through the establishment of progressive legal and policy frameworks. These include the National Land Policy of 1995, the Land Acts No. 4 and No. 5 of 1999, the Land Disputes Courts Act of 2002, and the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania of 1977, all of which recognize gender equality in land access and ownership (URT, 1995; URT, 1999; TAWLA, 2018). Furthermore, the Women and Gender Development Policy encourage collaboration between the government and non-state actors, including Legal Aid Organizations, to promote awareness of women's legal rights (GoT, 2000). Despite these legal advancements, the realization of women's land rights in Tanzania remains limited. Studies indicate that only about 15 percent of women own land, with ownership patterns heavily influenced by customary norms, patriarchal attitudes, and limited legal awareness, particularly in rural areas (Grace et al., 2021; TAWLA, 2018). Discrimination persists due to the continued application of customary laws, inadequate capacity among local authorities, and insufficient dissemination of legal information (USAID, 2016). If these disparities remain unaddressed, there is a risk of widening the gendered poverty gap, especially among rural women who depend

heavily on land for their livelihoods (Marwa, 2015).

2. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Framework: Property Rights Theory

This study is grounded in Property Rights Theory, which conceptualizes property rights as socially and legally sanctioned rules that govern access to, use of, and control over scarce resources (Pradhan & Gregorio, 2004). The theory emphasizes that well-defined and enforceable property rights are essential for ensuring equitable resource distribution, enhancing economic productivity, and minimizing conflict (Jongwook & Joseph, 2005). In contexts where statutory land laws coexist with customary practices, inconsistencies often arise, limiting women's effective access to land. Within such settings, Legal Aid Services play a critical role in translating formal legal provisions into practice by enhancing awareness, enforcement, and legal empowerment. This study therefore applies Property Rights Theory to assess how Legal Aid Services influence women's awareness of land ownership rights in Mufindi District, Tanzania.

B. Women's Perceptions of Legal Aid Services

Empirical literature indicates that women's perceptions of Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs) are closely linked to their level of legal awareness and empowerment. Chaudhary et al. (2012) found that increased awareness of legal rights significantly enhances women's empowerment. Similarly, Nyange et al. (2017) reported that women engaged in Legal Aid Services (LAS) interventions demonstrate higher levels of empowerment compared to men, largely due to targeted awareness and capacity-building initiatives. Findings from the present study reveal that 80 percent of women respondents perceived LAOs as having positively contributed to building their confidence in asserting land ownership rights. This aligns with Meinzen-Dick et al. (2019), who argue that secure land rights strengthen women's control over resources and improve their decision-making power. However, awareness of international legal frameworks remained limited. Only 25 percent of respondents acknowledged LAOs' effectiveness in disseminating information on international conventions such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, while the majority remained undecided. This suggests a gap in community-level outreach, a concern also raised by Magutsa (2018), who notes that many gender policies exist largely at the policy level with limited grassroots impact.

C. Strategies Used by Legal Aid Organizations to Promote Women's Land Rights

Legal Aid Organizations employ diverse strategies to enhance women's land rights, including legal education, advocacy, mediation, and support for joint land titling. For instance, in Kosovo, legal aid providers offered face-to-face legal advice to encourage compliance with national land laws and promote joint property registration (World Bank, 2015). However, evidence shows that such interventions alone may yield limited behavioral change, highlighting the complexity of land tenure issues. Knox et al. (2016) emphasize that effective land rights interventions require integrated and multi-stakeholder approaches involving women, men, traditional leaders, judicial officials, policymakers, and the media. Similarly, USAID (2021) identifies key strategies such as engaging men as agents of change, increasing women's participation in land administration processes, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, and promoting women's representation in land governance institutions. These approaches underscore the importance of context-specific and participatory strategies that address prevailing social norms and gender dynamics.

D. Roles of Legal Aid Organizations in Promoting Women's Land Rights

Legal Aid Organizations play a vital role in legal empowerment, awareness creation, and the transformation of discriminatory social norms. Ndugwa et al. (2018) argue that NGOs and CSOs are essential in holding governments accountable and advocating for gender-sensitive land policies. Landesa (2012) further stresses the need for gender-responsive legal frameworks that reflect women lived realities rather than gender-neutral laws that often fail to address structural inequalities. Findings from this study indicate that 70 percent of respondents recognized LAOs' contribution to addressing harmful cultural practices that hinder women's land ownership. This is particularly significant in rural areas where customary norms frequently override statutory laws (World Bank, 2015; SIDA, 2015). Nevertheless, challenges persist in translating legal reforms into practice, as customary laws continue to favor male land ownership. Consequently, LAOs must strengthen community-level engagement and tailor interventions to local contexts to ensure sustainable improvements in women's land rights.

3. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to examine the influence of Legal Aid Services on women’s awareness and realization of land ownership rights in rural Tanzania. The design enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data at a single point in time, allowing for an integrated assessment of women’s experiences, perceptions, and legal empowerment outcomes. The study was conducted in Mufindi District, Iringa Region, southern Tanzania. The district was purposively selected due to its predominantly rural character, reliance on land-based livelihoods, continued dominance of customary land tenure systems, and the presence of active Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs). These characteristics make Mufindi a suitable context for examining gendered land rights and the role of legal empowerment initiatives. The study population comprised rural women, legal aid providers, community leaders, and local government officials involved in land governance and legal aid delivery. A total of 120 respondents participated in the study. Multistage sampling was applied: purposive sampling was used to select the study area and key informants—including Legal Aid Officers, Ward Community Development Officers, Village Executive Officers, village leaders, and traditional authorities—based on their roles and expertise in land-related issues. Simple random sampling was employed to select women respondents from selected villages to enhance representativeness and reduce selection bias.

Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires administered to women respondents, focusing on awareness of land rights, exposure to Legal Aid Services, land ownership status, and perceptions of statutory and customary land tenure systems. Trained enumerators administered the questionnaires to ensure consistency and accuracy. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants using semi-structured interview guides. These interviews explored the roles and strategies of Legal Aid Services, challenges in implementing land laws, and contextual factors influencing women’s access to land. Interviews were conducted in Swahili, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize key variables and patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using content analysis, whereby transcripts were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes aligned with the study objectives. Validity was ensured through expert review of research instruments and pilot testing conducted outside the study area. Reliability was strengthened through standardized data collection procedures, enumerator training, and data verification processes. Ethical approval and research permission were obtained from relevant authorities. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

4. Results and Discussion

A. The Perceptions of Women on Legal Aid Services Provided in The Study Area

The present study was initially set to determine the perceptions of women on legal aid services provided in the study area. The sampled respondents were required to provide their opinions on the subject matter. (See results in Table 3.1)

Table 1: Presents Respondents the Perceptions of Women on Legal Aid Services Provided by Laos

Attribute(s)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Legal Aid services have been playing a greater role in promoting women awareness on their struggle to own resources		
YES	78	65
NO	42	35
Legal Aid services contribute to create confidence among women when they fight their land ownership rights		
YES	76	63
NO	44	37
The services provided by Legal Aid Organizations have greatly promoted women to understand their land rights		
YES	90	75
NO	30	25

Source: *Research Findings (2025)*

Results from Table 3 indicate that women generally hold positive perceptions of the services provided by Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs). A majority of respondents (65%) reported that LAOs play a significant role in enhancing women’s awareness of their struggle to own land and other productive resources. Similarly, 63 percent of respondents acknowledged that LAOs contribute to building women’s confidence to assert their land ownership rights. An even higher proportion (75%) affirmed that LAOs have improved women’s understanding of land rights. These findings suggest that women increasingly value Legal Aid Services as a key mechanism for legal awareness and empowerment at the community level.

The positive perceptions observed in this study are consistent with existing literature. Chaudhary et al. (2012) found that increased awareness of legal rights has a significant positive effect on women’s empowerment. Likewise, Nyange et al. (2017) reported that women who participate in Legal Aid Services (LAS) interventions attain higher levels of empowerment than men, largely due to targeted awareness-raising initiatives. These outcomes align with the core mandate of LAOs to enhance legal consciousness as a foundation for empowerment.

However, evidence from other contexts suggests that awareness alone may not translate into structural change. For example, in Kosovo, legal aid providers offered face-to-face legal advice to promote compliance with land laws and joint property registration, yet the intervention had limited impact on household registration of female land ownership (World Bank, 2015). This reinforces the argument by Knox et al. (2016) that no single intervention can effectively address women’s insecure land rights. Instead, sustainable progress requires integrated, community-wide approaches involving legal awareness, capacity building, advocacy, and engagement with multiple stakeholders.

B. Appropriateness of The Strategies Used by Legal Aid Organizations to Promote Women's Land Rights

Majority of organizations have been educating women on their legal rights through various mechanisms, including workshops, publications and the media (Knox et al, (2016). Thus, this study intended to get respondents opinions on whether these mechanisms are applicable and appropriate to deliver the intended message (See the result in table 3.2).

Table 2: Presents Respondents Opinions on The Relevance of Strategies Used by Laos to Promote Women’s Land Rights

Attribute(s)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Is it applicable for LEOs to use workshops and seminars as a strategy in creating women’s awareness in their struggle for land ownership rights		
YES	43	36
NO	77	74
Is it relevant for LEOs to provide legal aid services through Media like Radio and televisions		
NO	66	55
YES	54	45

Source: *Research Findings (2025)*

The study particularly in this sub section examined the relevance of strategies employed by Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs) to promote women’s land rights. Findings indicate that a majority of respondents (74%) considered workshops and seminars as ineffective in raising awareness about women’s land ownership rights. Similarly, 55% of respondents expressed skepticism about the use of media platforms, such as radio and television, for this purpose. These results suggest that some strategies currently employed by LAOs may be poorly aligned with the local context, potentially limiting their effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes.

The findings resonate with Knox et al. (2016), who argue that successful interventions rely on participatory approaches that reflect communities’ specific experiences and social dynamics regarding women’s property rights. Moreover, USAID (2021) recommends context-sensitive strategies to enhance women’s land rights, including engaging men as champions for change, promoting women’s participation in land certification or titling processes, strengthening enforcement through collaboration with government and justice actors, and supporting women’s representation in land and resource governance structures. The results highlight the need for LAOs to adopt locally tailored, multi-stakeholder strategies to maximize impact and ensure sustainable improvements in women’s land ownership and empowerment.

C. The roles of Legal Aid Organizations in Promoting Women Land Rights

Women’s de facto access to, and control of land is restricted by lack of implementation of existing laws, by customary law, traditional and social practices, norms and power structures within communities (SIDA, 2015). This study was therefore intended to assess the roles of LAOs in addressing all restrictions for Women Land Rights (See the results in table3.3).

Table 3: Presents Respondents Opinions on The Roles of Laos in Promoting Women Land Rights

Category of the role to be done by LAOs	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	f	%
Ensure that policy makers are updating law frameworks regarding to land rights	24	20	18	15	60	50	6	6	5
Create communities’ awareness on various international conventions related to gender and right to land.	18	15	12	10	72	60	7	11	9
Contributes to impart confidence among women when they fight their land ownership rights	60	50	36	30	24	20	0	0	0
Promoting eradication of social cultural practices barriers to women ownership over resources ie land.	52	43	32	27	36	30	0	0	0

Source: *Research Findings (2025)*

Findings reveal mixed perceptions regarding the performance of Legal Aid Organizations (LAOs) in promoting women’s land rights. As shown in Table 3.3, only 35 percent of respondents (20% strongly agreed; 15% agreed) perceived LAOs as effective in influencing policymakers to update land-related legal frameworks. In contrast, the combined proportion of undecided and dissatisfied respondents was higher, indicating limited community confidence in LAOs’ role in policy advocacy.

This suggests that while LAOs operate at the grassroots level, their engagement with higher-level policy processes remains insufficiently visible to communities. These findings align with Ndugwa et al. (2018), who emphasize the need for sustained pressure by NGOs and CSOs to advance gender-responsive land reforms, and Landesa (2012), which advocates for gender-sensitive laws that address women lived realities rather than gender-neutral frameworks.

Similarly, LAOs were perceived as less effective in creating awareness of international conventions related to gender and land rights. Only 25 percent of respondents acknowledged LAOs’ effectiveness in this area, while the majority remained undecided or disagreed. This points to limited dissemination of information on instruments such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, which are critical reference points for women’s land rights claims (SIDA, 2015). The finding supports Magutsa’s (2018) observation that many gender-related policies and commitments remain confined to policy documents with minimal grassroots penetration.

In contrast, perceptions were strongly positive regarding LAOs’ role in building women’s confidence to claim land ownership rights. A substantial 80 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that LAOs have enhanced women’s confidence in asserting their land rights. This finding underscores the effectiveness of legal awareness and empowerment initiatives at the community level and supports evidence by Meinzen-Dick et al. (2019), who link secure land rights to increased confidence, economic participation, and decision-making power among women.

Finally, the study found that LAOs are making notable progress in addressing harmful social and cultural practices that hinder women's land ownership. A combined 70 percent of respondents acknowledged LAOs' contribution in challenging discriminatory norms, despite the continued dominance of patriarchal inheritance systems (World Bank, 2015). This suggests that while structural and legal challenges persist, LAOs play a meaningful role in shifting community attitudes toward more gender-equitable land relations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Legal Aid Services have significantly contributed to empowering women in Mufindi District by enhancing awareness, building confidence, and promoting equitable access to land. Women appreciate the role of LAOs in addressing discriminatory cultural norms and fostering greater legal literacy. However, the effectiveness of LASs is constrained by the use of inappropriate strategies, limited policy advocacy, and inadequate dissemination of international legal frameworks. To enhance impact, the study recommends that the government support and subsidize LAOs, enabling them to adopt contextually appropriate strategies that reach rural women effectively. Strategies could include participatory community engagement, mobile outreach, and literacy-sensitive approaches. Additionally, LAOs should intensify advocacy with policymakers to update land laws and implement systematic, accessible land registration systems that accommodate illiterate women and men, for instance through biometric identification. Strengthening multi-level interventions that combine grassroots empowerment with policy engagement is essential for achieving sustainable improvements in women's land rights. In conclusion, LASs is a critical mechanism for promoting gender equity in land ownership. While substantial progress has been made in empowering women at the community level, ongoing adaptation, strategic outreach, and policy engagement are required to address persistent structural and cultural barriers. These findings underscore the importance of integrated, context-sensitive approaches to legal empowerment as a pathway toward equitable resource access and broader social and economic development.

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