



# How does Women's Access to Land Resources Affect Childhood Nutritional Security in Semi-Arid Kenya



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## INTRODUCTION

Food security remains a major challenge for smallholder farmers in the rural regions of semi-arid Kenya, where over 35% of children under five are stunted (DHS 2009). Smallholder farmers have limited mechanisms to cope with threats to food security, such as droughts, population growth, food price spikes (FAO 2004). Although over 70% of labour force is composed of women, less than 2% of women formally own farmlands. Previous research indicates that when women have better access to agricultural and household resources, it translates to better child nutrition in the household. In Kenya, women have access to land resources primarily through kinship (Carney 1988). Government's efforts to privatize land in rural regions is ongoing (Borwein 2013). In 2010, Kenya's constitution provided new rights for daughters to inherit land.

**Our study focuses on how attitudes towards women's land inheritance and women's access to land resources associate with childhood nutritional status.**

This research combines the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Framework (SRLF) (Scoones 1998) with the Theory of Access (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Access is defined as the ability, akin to power, to benefit from resources. It includes rights-based and relational mechanisms of access. Land resources includes cultivated land, food and income generated from harvest and livestock.

## MIXED-METHODS

The research was conducted in Makueni & Machakos Counties in the semi-arid midlands of Kenya. Interviewees included smallholder farmers, village elders, chiefs, district agricultural officers. Audio recordings of interviews were translated and transcribed into English for thematic, axial and open coding.

60 in-depth interviews

16 focus-group discussions

7 community meetings

Questionnaires:

252 households

125 communities

Village elders participated in community questionnaires in each village where a mother and child were sampled.

Anthropometric data for children under 36 months is from Kenya Medical Research Institute nutritional survey 2012. The same sample of women were followed-up in 2014 to learn more about their level of access to land resources.

## FINDINGS

### Customary Norms on Women's Land Entitlement "Whoever marries has a piece of land"

- Wives hold customary ownership after the spouse dies
- Access to land stops when ties are severed with husband's family or clan (*Mbui ya Ulee* "Goat of Refusal")
- Unmarried or divorced women access land with much constraints from family members
- Access to harvest depends on land allocation
- Kenyan president signed bill institutionalizing polygamy on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014

### Attitudes towards Daughters' Land Inheritance "It is like murder!"

- Interpret clause with additional conditions – only unmarried women can inherit land from father
- Inequality "she cannot have two farms"
- Constitution as a foreign institution while the traditional values prevails
- "The constitution is new, but we have practiced the Kamba traditions for long"
- Fear of losing ancestral land "...she might sell the piece [of land] have given her and go to stay with the husband"

### Emerging Themes from Cases of Tenuous Access

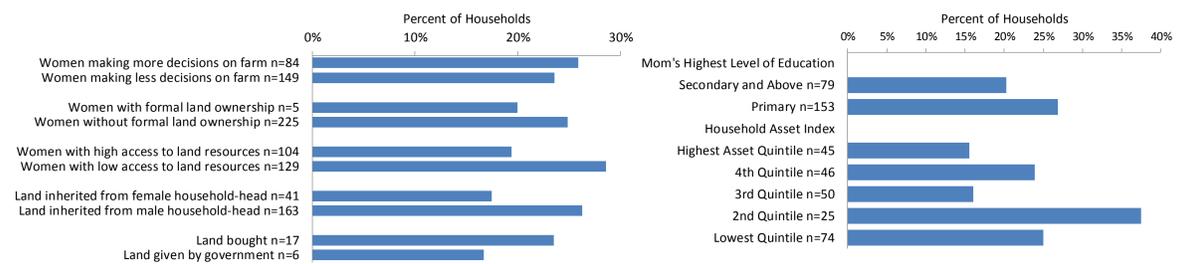
- Customary rules depends on available resources  
"If the land is large, she can have [a piece]"
- Land subdivision is often left until parents passed away as a mechanism of control and security for parents  
"They can solve the problem after I pass. I will not be there to see the family disputes"
- Family peace is a higher priority  
".[if I give my daughter land]..in two to three days, [the wives of my sons will] start conflicts. There will be conflicts every day."
- Self-reliance for land; community cohesion for labour  
"I've taken you to school, go and buy your own land."



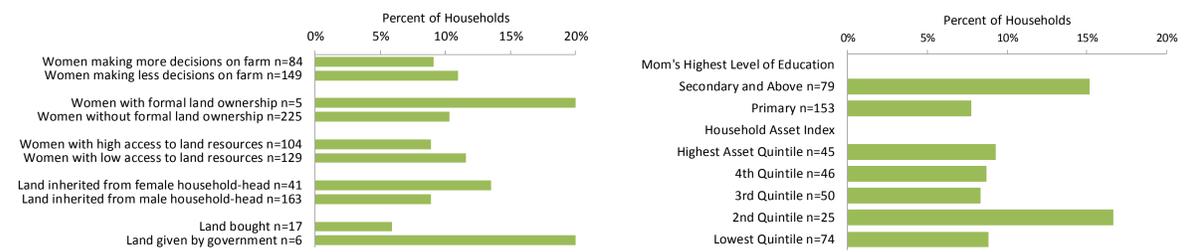
"Even if they separate, let her search for another husband. Because she moved out of the family, let her just go and look for another man and get married to him... or search for a job, but not to come here [asking for land]."

## LAND RESOURCE ACCESS AND CHILD NUTRITION STATUS

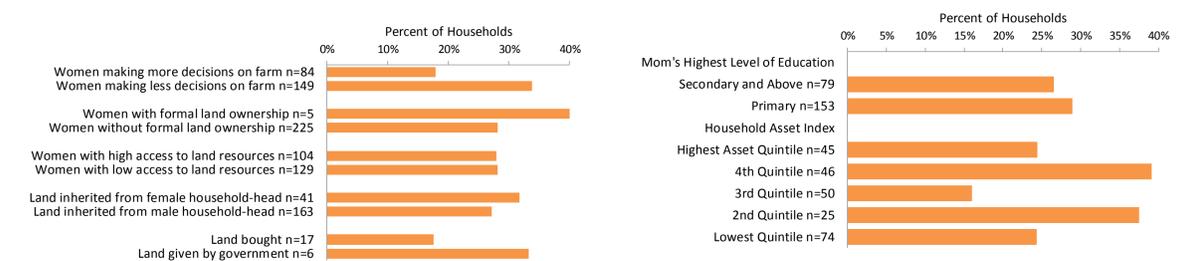
### PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILD STUNTING



### PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILD WASTING



### PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILD UNDERWEIGHT



## IMPLICATIONS

- Shaping of resilience mechanisms needs better understanding of attitudes and interactions between gender, customary norms and formal institutions
- Existing local institutions enhance social capital to buffer lack of land resources as natural capital e.g. women self-help groups that provide labour, financial and physical capital
- Households where women reported making more decisions on farm activities (excluding sales decisions) is associated with lower prevalence of stunting but higher prevalence of childhood wasting, underweight
- Households where women reported having higher access to land resources is associated with lower prevalence of child stunting and wasting
- Households where women formally owned land are also female-headed households that have lower access to labour and capital to sustain food security, may explain higher prevalence of child wasting

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Multi-level statistical analysis: to explore land resource access and social cohesion
- In-depth case studies: to inform policy makers, practitioners, and farmers on enhancing resilience mechanisms

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