Gender Mainstreaming the
A Critical Assessment

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Land reform has long been regarded as a key aspect of development strategies aiming to transform land ownership structures to reflect democratic principles of equitable access and to redress histories of dispossession. As the World Bank continues to play a lead role in setting policy agendas in developing countries, the release of this report is extremely significant and provides a unique opportunity to examine its vision for the future of land relations in developing countries.

This paper challenges the notion that Land Policies contributes anything new to the liberal discourse on property rights. Although its conclusions and policy recommendations are said to rest on an objective analysis of a wide-range of empirical research on land relations and rural development, the information that is selected tends only to reinforce deeply-held, but often simplistic assumptions about the relationship between various forms of property rights, economic growth, and poverty reduction. The aim of this paper is to examine some of the factors that have not been taken into account in the rights-based approach for land reform presented in Land Policies, and what implications these omissions hold for women. In particular, the study challenges the report’s attempt to link the promotion of land and rural credit markets to “sustainable development” (i.e., economic, social and environmental betterment) by revealing the reliance of its strategy on exploitative gender relations and women’s unpaid labour. The analysis presents a fundamental critique of the way in which land policy research is done by arguing that it is necessary to move beyond the tendency to emphasize the importance of land rights in isolation of the many other factors that determine the relative success of land policy initiatives. To this effect, the paper is divided into four sections: Section I presents an overview of the aims and recommendations of Land Policies; Section II outlines some of the problematic assumptions contained in the report and delineates their association with a long-standing discourse on property rights; Section III presents a gender critique of the report by obviating the many factors that are not considered in the strategy presented; and finally, Section IV concludes the analysis with a discussion of the troublesome implications of policies based on the recommendations of the report.

1. The World Bank’s New Land Agenda

Land Policies is the culmination of the World Bank’s three-year review of its involvement in land reform. The report was drafted in 2001 with
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the collaboration of multilateral and bilateral organizations, and posted on the website of the World Bank's Land Policy and Administration Group for consultation thereafter. In the summer of 2002, the Bank held a series of regional workshops to receive feedback on the draft report from civil society groups and other interested parties, and to obtain technical input from key policy makers, academics, and representatives of civil society. Subsequently, many of the major bilateral and multilateral development agencies are revisiting their approaches to land issues (e.g. DFID, 2002) and some, including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), are addressing land reform issues for the first time at the policy level. As such, Land Policies has prompted a great deal of discussion among policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and the broader development community, as well as a general push to promote a "comprehensive and integrated approach" to land policy amongst them. Given the powerful influence of multilateral and bilateral agencies in setting the agenda for 'development' in the South, there is good reason to believe that Land Policies will have a substantial impact on the resolution of land issues for many years to come.

The World Bank's last public pronouncement on land issues was the 1975 Land Reform Policy Paper. This earlier report analyzed land largely in terms of agricultural use and productivity and advocated the creation of land markets and the privatization of land. In critical reflection, the authors of the present report note that the 1975 paper devoted little attention to the importance of land rights for empowering the poor and improving local governance, the development of the private sector outside agriculture, the gender and equity aspects associated with land, and the problems arising on marginal areas and at the interface between rural and urban areas. (2003: xlv)

The report's attempt to link the promotion of land and rural credit markets to "sustainable development" reveals the reliance of its strategy on exploitative gender relations and women's unpaid labour.

In contrast to the 1975 paper, Land Policies draws on a broad range of historical and micro-level empirical data in order to highlight the complexities of land relations. In doing so, it demonstrates the need for diverse approaches to land reform and development in ways that are economically, politically, socially, and environmentally desirable. Consequently, Land Policies has been ac-
known by many scholars and development practitioners as a significant turning point for the World Bank’s approach to land policy. The report moves beyond the familiar call for the privatization of land and the promotion of land markets that has long been a hallmark of the institution’s structural adjustment agenda, recognizing instead that this kind of policy advice may not be appropriate in countries where market economies are functioning imperfectly or are not fully developed. Furthermore, the report states that increasing tenure security in land does not necessarily require making land transferable through a sales markets (WB 2003: 70), and that in some cases common property, rental or lease arrangements may be more appropriate than individualized tenure. For these reasons, Land Policies is widely applauded for acknowledging the limitations of past approaches to land policy that do not take into account the fact that patterns of land ownership, access, and use are not simply the product of the supply and demand dynamics of an impersonal market, but rather the result of “political power struggles and non-economic restrictions” (WB 2003: 6). The extent of its attention to questions of equity (e.g., stronger land rights for women, herders, Indigenous peoples, and other historically disadvantaged populations) and human rights considerations is also viewed as a novel turn for the Bank. In the foreword of the report, the chief economist of the WB, Nicholas Stern, writes: “(D)ealing with efficiency will not automatically also resolve all equity issues” (2003: xi).

Despite explicit recognition of the political basis of land ownership and access patterns in the Land Policies report, the World Bank seems extraordinarily non-cognizant of its own implication in a powerful, old, and deeply-entrenched discourse on private property rights and, by connotation, its role in (both implicitly and explicitly) advocating one particular model of development: namely “the gradual individualization of property rights to land” (WB 2003: 32) on grounds that it “provides the greatest incentives for efficient resource use” (22). Although it is nowhere stated in the report that privatization of land is the only option, it emphasizes the need to speed up the natural evolution of more secure (and ultimately private) tenure systems for land. This evolutionary model of land tenure reform reflects western notions of property rights which have been codified over centuries in what has come to be known as the “property rights school” (PRS). Before moving on to a discussion of the gender implications of this discourse as they are presented in the policy recommendations of Land Policies, it is vital to first reveal its theoretical affiliation with the PRS and to discuss the limitations this discourse imposes on discussions of land relations and policy.

II. Reinventing the Tragedy of Private Property

Despite its many caveats, exceptions, and left turns, Land Policies clearly exhibits the dominant view of the PRS—that private property is far superior and represents a higher level of economic development than common property arrangement. It is assumed that, by default, when a society reaches a particular stage of development (i.e., high population growth and increasing scarcity and valuation of land) common property institutions will “naturally” evolve in the direction of individual tenures. The transition is thus regarded to be an internal, natural, and rational response to exogenous changes. Expected “benefits” from new security of tenure include: the transfer of land from less to more dynamic farmers; increased availability and access to credit; increased willingness and ability of owners to invest in their land and to manage it with future benefits and generations in mind; and, overall, improved economic well-being (Plateau; Sjaastad and Bromley). For the PRS, then, private property is considered an essential ingredient in economic development because it creates incentives for owners to innovate and invest in their land. “Tenure security” is desirable as a means to the larger goal of encouraging the transfer or reallocation of land and other collective resources from less to more dynamic users, thereby encouraging economic growth, food security, and rural poverty reduction.

Although Land Policies presents a far more sophisticated and nuanced version of this thesis, there is little ambiguity about its theoretical lineage. This is made clear when Land Policies discusses the benefits of tenure security:

By defining who is entitled to reap the benefit streams that flow from a given resource and thereby establishing correspondence between the effort expended in trying to increase the value of this resource and the reward to be had from such activity, land rights are not only a key element of the social fabric of most societies, but also a critical determinant of investment, and thus of economic growth. (2003: 8)
nition" of property rights is a crucial determinant of investment and economic growth by ensuring that people invest the optimal amounts of labour and/or resources needed to extract sustainably the maximum benefits from land. Despite the fact that the report acknowledges that the individualization of land tenure is "by no means a linear process or a historical necessity" and that policies must provide "sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs" (WB 2003: 32), the basic PRS formula (security = investment = growth) remains intact.7

The boundaries that delineate the hegemonic PRS discourse limit the extent to which contemporary debates about land relations and rural or agricultural development more broadly deviate from questions of "rights" and "efficiency." Whereas the latter (efficiency) has long dominated these discussions, the entrance of the former (rights) into land policy discussions at major international institutions like the World Bank victory won more recently thanks to the efforts of scholars, activists and professionals interested in the equity dimensions of property relations. Despite the undeniably important inclusivity that this change represents, a concentration on question of rights to land directs attention away from the many other factors that also determine the broader social, ecological, and economic impact of land policy interventions. As will be demonstrated in the following section, the equation in Land Policies of the promotion of equitable and efficient land and credit markets with equitable growth and poverty reduction is substantially weakened when one takes into account the impact of many ways women are subordinate within the family, on the land and within communities (e.g., the gendered nature of labour and asset distribution).

III. Gender Analysis of Land Policies

In the land and rural development research and policy advice presented in Land Policies, women are directly considered only in relation to the lack of formal rights and access they have to land (WB 2003: 38). While attention to this is merited, it is important to note the disconnection that exists in the report between its concern for women's individual rights and its main focus on the promotion of household/landholding patterns that reflect the most efficient organization of production.

The report is advocating policies to support the efficiency of small farms if their efficiency-producing productivity advantage is based on exploitative labour relations and the un-equal position of women in the household.

The main impetus for land reform, according to the report, is the reorganization of property rights not through government-implemented programs of redistribution but through reform of credit markets so that land markets will naturally favour the most efficient agricultural producers. According to the report, small-scale family farms have a natural "productivity advantage" over large farm operations that are reliant on waged labour (WB 2003: 81).8 However, it is noted that the productivity advantage of family farms is not enjoyed by society because other factors—such as the ability to access capital and technology—are not equal between large operators and family farmers (WB 2003: 81). Noting that "imperfections in input, product, credit, and insurance markets" can affect the functioning of land markets and lead to outcomes "that deviate from what one would expect in a hypothetical situation of perfectly functioning markets" (2003: 82), Land Policies advocates two necessarily related strategies: First, access to or (preferably) ownership of land by small farmers must be ensured because, without secure rights, there is little or no incentive for them to invest in land productively and/or sustainably. Second, because security of tenure would not be possible or sufficient if smallholders cannot access formal credit, distortions in the credit market that cause banks to favour large and medium farms over small ones need to be overcome.9

Thus, the PRS-inspired argument presented in Land Policies proposes that more secure rights augmented by policies that will address credit-market biases and imperfections will increase the incentive of small farming households to invest in and care for land sustainably, leading to private and societal improvement through subsequent growth and equity gains. The acknowledgement in the report that securing property tenure will not automatically lead to investment and ensuing benefits as long as there are distortions in credit and other markets is evidence of the increasing sophistication of the old PRS discourse. However, the persistent focus in Land Policies on technical, rights-based solutions to rural poverty (e.g., the removal of "policy-induced" credit market distortions so that land markets can function efficiently and award relative gains to small, land-poor farming households) is extremely problematic when one begins to look at the gendered division of labour, power, and control inside the "household" and, more broadly, within society at large. The assumption is that making credit accessible to small-scale farmers will lead to the automatic and natural evolution of tenure arrangements that favour the most efficient producer. In this case, as the report makes clear, it is small-scale, family farmers who
would stand to gain. The question that must be asked now is *who within the family farms will benefit.* Astonishingly, despite the attention paid earlier in the report to the inadequacy of unitary models of the "household" (WB 2003: 38), at no time does the report discuss *who* comprises this highly efficient, unpaid, and supposedly willing workforce. Given the fact that women have been recognized widely as the principal producers in the agricultural sphere in the south, it can be deduced that the report is implicitly referring to the labour of women. The assumption, therefore, is that women's "underutilized" (WB 2003: 82) labour will be available at no cost as an extension of their reproductive labour in the household. It is obviously problematic that the report is advocating policies to support the efficiency of small farms if, as is often the case, their efficiency-producing productivity advantage is based on exploitative labour relations and the unequal position of women within the household.

On a related point, it is also worth critically assessing what the implications might be to women of using land as collateral to access formal credit. Given the fluctuations of commodity markets, it may be difficult for family farms to repay their debt if agricultural production is the primary means of income generation. Where this is the case, pressure on the productivity of unwaged female labour (the factor that supposedly makes small-scale farms more productive in the first place) will increase. This will result in the *extensification* of unpaid labour (e.g., the recruitment of children) and the *intensification* of labour (i.e., longer hours). Furthermore, as is pointed out in *Land Policies*, the capital attained through the mortgaging of land will free up and enable members of the household to develop nonfarm enterprises (WB 2003: 58). There is, however, a strong likelihood that men will be the ones who leave the farm and, by implication, leave women at home to farm mortgaged land alone. Commenting on this point, Ambreena Manji warns that, "it will ultimately be women's labour on the land which services rural debt" (105).

In sum, within the family structure of farming households, the impact of the policies for rural development and poverty alleviation presented in *Land Policies* are likely to be detrimental to the interests of women. Ironically, women are identified in the report as one of the main targets for assistance through policies to improve their access and rights to land. The focus in *Land Policies* on the need to secure the "equality of women's land rights to those of men" (WB 2003: 38) is commendable, but essentially useless if women in their roles as labourers, co-owners, and mortgagers is not taken into consideration. Once these considerations are taken into account, it becomes clear that the interests of women may not figure very high at the World Bank.

**IV. Conclusion**

It has been argued in this paper that the "rights-based" discourse presented in *Land Policies* reproduces many of the problematic assumptions inherent in the liberal, PRS-inspired approach to questions of land, labour and capital. Although its strategy for rural development—i.e., removing policy-induced barriers to producers’ rights to land, the report neglects to account for the many political, social, and economic factors that disadvantage women. As women comprise a significant target population for the benefits of the policy paper’s recommendations (WB 2003: 57), this critique presents a formidable challenge to the hypotheses and promises outlined in *Land Policies."

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1Including the Department for International Development in the UK, the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit in Germany, and the United States Agency for International Development.

unavailable or excessively expensive.

At the time of writing, a small team in the Policy Branch at CIDA is nearing completion of the organization’s first land policy. See Pestieau and Tait for more details.

It is noted in the report that, “researchers now widely recognize that in the presence of multiple market and institutional imperfections, ‘first-best’ policy advice that was based on an ideal world of perfect markets without transaction costs and structural rigidities is unlikely to be appropriate” (WB 2003: 6).

This idea is implicit in comments like: “The desirability of group rights will often decrease with economic development” (WB 2003: 31).

The conceptual underpinnings of this proposition were most clearly spelled out in a seminal essay by Demsetz. The most notable application and apparent confirmation of Demsetz’s theories is that of North and Thomas in their study of European economic history and the evolution of property.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the many problems with this rationally-persuasive equation. For critiques of the PRS, see: Ellsworth; Plateau; Sjaastad and Bromley.

This is because smaller family farms can adjust to “the vagaries of nature” (i.e. the weather, natural disasters, etc.) and “the spatial dispersion of the production process” (i.e. travel between scattered plots) without incurring extra costs (WB 2003: 81); and, because family labour has “higher incentives to provide effort” it does not need costly managerial supervision. Although the report fails to make this point explicit, the relative efficiency of family farms is also a function of the fact that family members (especially women and children) are not financially remunerated for their work.

Because the costs of and political impediments to foreclosing on smallholders’ is high, financing is often

References


