How do Women Maintain Access to Land in the Context of Multiple Land Users in Contemporary Rural Tanzania?

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Abstract

Rural Tanzania is increasingly experiencing a growing heterogeneity of land users, driven by demographic shifts, socio-economic changes, and policy transformations, all of which influence women's ability to maintain secure access to land. Customary practices such as marriage, inheritance, and communal property access are now being practiced alongside statutory frameworks, including land policies and the transformation of communal land into private property, often influenced by economic investments and land acquisitions. Although legislative frameworks have been established to facilitate land access for both men and women, they remain insufficient, as women continue to face challenges in sustaining access to land amidst the emergence of multiple land users with multiple land use systems. Guided by Marxist Feminist (MF) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) theories, this study employed a qualitative research approach to examine women's experiences in accessing land in Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages in Rufiji District, Tanzania. The findings reveal that social transformation is reshaping the cultural meanings attached to land resulting to multiple process sometimes challenging women's ability to maintain access to land. Nonetheless, some women are actively exercising their agency by adopting context-specific strategies to reclaim and maintain access to land. These insights highlight the need for a more nuanced discourse on women's capacity to retain land access in contemporary rural settings, ensuring their effective use of land to support food security in rural communities.

Key Words: Women's Access to Land, Multiple Land Users, Land Access Systems

Introduction

Access to land is essential for enhancing women's land rights, guaranteeing food security, and boosting rural livelihoods. In the context of this study, and drawing on Ribot and Peluso (2003), access to land is conceptualized not merely as a legal entitlement to ownership but also as the ability to utilize and derive benefits from land for personal, familial, and communal purposes. This broader understanding highlights the multifaceted nature of land tenure systems and their critical importance to rural livelihoods especially in such a time when demographic,

socioeconomic, and legislative changes have allowed for the development of a multiple land-use system economies on land which had traditionally been predominantly experiences single of few land use systems (Mwaipopo, 2021).

These developments are unfolding in rural communities where the dependence on land by women has remained high, most lacking viable alternatives out of agriculture. Women's participation in the agricultural labor force in developing countries for example varies with regional variations ranging from 20% in Latin America to more than 50% in certain regions of Africa and Asia (Agarwal, 2022; Agarwal, 2020). In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is said to be at least 50% of the agricultural workforce (Notess *et al*., 2021). Despite their substantial contribution, they continue to face structural limitations in acquiring and maintaining secure access to land in many communities which is the main means of livelihood in a majority of rural places (Mbilinyi *et al.,* 2022; Moyo, 2017). These challenges arise from a complex interplay of institutional, legal, sociocultural, and economic factors (Wineman and Liverpool-Tasie, 2016; Harvey, 2007), which have recently been exacerbated by the growing number of land users due to demographic, socio-economic, and policy changes (*ibid*). Despite increasing international commitments to gender equality in land rights, such as those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and various international human rights frameworks, gender disparities in land access and ownership continue to persist (Nadasen, 2012).

The socio-economic, demographic, and policy transformations that are increasingly accommodating multiple land users in rural areas present both challenges and opportunities for rural populations, particularly vulnerable groups, including women (Kivaria, 2020; Mwamlangala, 2019; Thompson, 2018). This is being experienced although land reforms have been implemented with the aim of formalizing land tenure and promoting equity to ensure continued access to land. Many of such reforms however often fail to account for the influence of how social relations may hinder or facilitate access to land for vulnerable groups including women in rural areas (Mbilinyi *et al.,* 2022; Mwaipopo, 2021). These relations, defined as the organized interactions and connections among individuals, organizations, and groups in society are shaped by power dynamics, gender, socio-economic disparities, marital residency, marital status and age (Jain et al., 2023; Kivaria, 2020). Customary practices, such as marriage, inheritance, and communal property access, which have historically served as vital pathways for women to access land are currently having to contend with new ways of accessing land.

Statutory measures which include privatization through financial investments in land (Sulle, 2020, 2017), land purchases (Mwaipopo, 2021), and revised forms of communal land ownership managed by statutory, national, or local government systems (Jain *et al.,* 2023) are linked to historical shifts in legal frameworks (Bluwstein *et al.,* 2018; Agarwal, 2003). These legal frameworks eventually had an impact on customary patterns of land inheritance, as was the case with Tanzania where land inheritance for both men and women after independence became governed by statutory, Islamic, and customary laws, a system of legal pluralism offering varying degrees of gender equality.

Land access systems have also been affected by the transformation of communal property access into private property, which has also influenced women's ability to maintain access to land in many rural areas worldwide. Verma (2007) for example, illustrated that a form of private land ownership existed even before the colonial period, exemplified by the Nyarubanja

system historically practiced in some parts of rural East African communities. Communal property access according to Araral (2014) and Ostrom (1990), refers to land resources accessible to all members of a community, enabling collective utilization of resources such as land, water, and forests. In many communities, this system allowed both men and women to benefit from communal resources, underscoring its significance in traditional land tenure systems (*ibid*).

Furthermore, Mbilinyi (2016) noted that private property rights were further intensified during colonial rule through the establishment of large cash crop plantations, primarily on common land, where many women traditionally gathered green vegetables, firewood, and medicinal plants for household use. This system was later adopted by most African governments after independence and was further reinforced with the introduction of market-driven and investment policies around the 1990s (*ibid*).

Amidst these transformations, many countries in Africa are still grappling with the powers of customary law, which in many communities in Tanzania for instance predominantly patrilineal, governing 80% of land-related practices and often limits women's rights to usufruct use or reliance on male relatives (Kivaria, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). Matrilineal practices, followed by about 20% of households, is becoming less and less evident, eroding due to migration, inter-ethnic marriages, and patriarchal influences (Kongela, 2020; Urassa, 2022; Babere & Mbeya, 2022).

Progressive legislation in Tanzania such as the National Land Act (1999) and the Village Land Act (1999) which formally recognize women's rights to access, own, and inherit land, through marriage and inheritance (Mbilinyi *et al.*, 2022; Kivaria, 2020) do not always guarantee rights of access in practice, particularly when multiple processes govern land access exist (Genicot and Hernandez-de-Benito, 2022; Dancer, 2017). For instance, further amendments, such as the Mortgage Financing (Special Provisions) Act of 2008, were introduced to protect women from discrimination in accessing credit, leases, and mortgages (Magawa & Hansungule, 2018).

Despite these advancements, some women are still facing challenges in maintaining access to land. For example, Genicot and Hernandez-de-Benito (2022) noted that, women in rural areas often struggle to assert land rights in cases of divorce, spousal death, or mortgages due to inadequate documentation, particularly in rural areas with traditional marriages. Some, fail to access land due to increased competition resulting from the changing context of land access systems, particularly the transformation of previously common property into private ownership through commercial agriculture due to multiple land users with diverse land use systems (Zang, 2020; Sulle, 2020; 2017).

At the same time, infrastructure expansion, commercial agriculture, population growth, and conservation initiatives have also contributed to increasing the complexities in land tenure systems (Walwa, 2020; Mwaipopo, 2021). These evolving dynamics introduced new land users and competing interests in rural areas, leading to multiple and often overlapping claims to land (Walwa, 2020; 2017). Demographic factors, population movements, including the relocation of certain communities such as pastoralist groups within rural areas in Tanzania have contributed to altering traditional land use systems, particularly agricultural and residential systems, thereby shaping women's ability to maintain land access (Walwa, 2020, 2017; Shemdoe & Mwanyoka (2015). In addition, policy changes have also influenced the situation

on land ownership. For example, revisions of the National Land policy of 1995 and 2023 (Wineman and Liverpool-Tasie (2016). This policy, which promotes investment and market-oriented land policies, increasingly facilitated land commodification which diminished common property access.

In addition, varying individual circumstances have placed women in different dispositions regarding access to land. Being differentiated by social hierarchies based on variables such as age, marital status, marital residency, and socioeconomic status, some women have been able to navigate patriarchal and other dominating land access systems through knowledge, finance and political power resources (Chigbu, 2019; Kudo (2015). Nonetheless, other women especially those with less resources face significant challenges in maintaining access to land as shown by Samwel & Niboye (2019) and Tsikata & Yaro (2014). This implies that in some areas, women have been able to employ alternative means of accessing land, primarily through land purchases.

Land markets today are increasingly important for improving women's access to land, offering opportunities for independent ownership and empowerment (Wineman and Liverpool-Tasie (2016). However, political and social norms have shaped land markets as gendered institutions, often limiting rural women's control over land use and their participation in transactions due to several factors. These include the gendered division of labor (Ossome, 2014) and limited access to resources such as finances, knowledge, and political power (Wineman and Liverpool-Tasie 2016; Archambault, 2015). Additionally, many women lack negotiation skills, which undermines their social standing and confidence in land transactions (Mwaipopo, 2021; Zang, 2020). Given this context, the objective of this study was to examine how women in contemporary rural communities maintain access to land and the implications of multiple land users on women's capacities to maintain their access to land.

To analyze women's capacity to retain access to land, this study employed the perspectives of Marxist Feminism (MF) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) which analyze how intersecting factors create complex layers of privilege or disadvantage. MF was chosen for its strength in analyzing how women's land access is influenced by the intersections of gender, socioeconomic disparities, and private resource ownership. In order to capture analytical areas that are not given prominence by the MF perspective, we also employed FPE theoretical perspective to allow deeper explorations of the intersections of gender, power dynamics, and environmental factors in shaping decision-making, access to, and control over resources (Rocheleau, 1991). By providing a more holistic framework, FPE effectively captures the multifaceted, inter-sectional, and ecologically interwoven dimensions of women's access to land in Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages (Sundberg, 2015). The analysis weaves in Peluso and Ribot's (2020) thinking, who argue that social relations within specific social and cultural contexts may either facilitate or hinder access to land, this study suggests that women's ability to maintain access to land has been informed by transforming social interactions which include kinship networks, social and political affiliations, and patron-client relationships. These often operate outside formal legal frameworks (*ibid*).

Methodology

This article draws from the study conducted in Mohoro East (Nyampaku Bara, Nyampaku Pwani, Nyampaku Mashariki, Nyamidege, and Nyautika hamlets) and Mohoro West (Old Mohoro, Sungapwani, Sungabara, Nyandote, Nyakikai, and Mwanani hamlets) villages of Rufiji district, Coast region in Tanzania between 2022 and 2024. Historically, these villages were one village known as Mohoro village and was originally inhabited by the *Wandengereko* people. In 1975, the village was officially registered under the number PW/KIJ/209, following its establishment as Mohoro *Ujamaa* village under Tanzania's *Ujamaa* policy. Severe flooding along the Rufiji River in 1968, which necessitated the relocation of people from affected hamlets (Nyandote, Nyakikai, Mwanani, Nyamidege, and Nyautika) was also part of the making of Mohoro vilage. In 2009, population growth led to the administrative division of Mohoro *Ujamaa* village into Mohoro West and Mohoro East villages (Samwel and Niboye, 2019). Despite this division, the two villages share geographical boundaries and land governance structures, including a joint Village Land Council (VLC), Village Council (VC), Village Assembly (VA), and Participatory Village Land Use Plans (PVLUPs) established in 2008 and 2011. Both villages also retain the same village registration certification as mentioned earlier. A strong social connection persists between the two villages, with no significant differences in land allocation, usage, or distribution.

Currently, the villages are inhabited by the *Wandengereko, Wasukuma, Wamasai,* and *Wamangati* ethnic groups, the latter's settlement being attributed to immigration from 2008, in search of pasture and arable land, following their eviction from the Ihefu basin in the Mbarali district (Mbeya region) and the Kilombero Wetlands in the Morogoro region (Walwa, 2020). Consequently, pastoralists sought grazing land for their livestock in various communities, including Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages (Sulle, 2020). These are referred to as mixed farmers in this study.

The villages also predominantly adhere to the Islamic faith (Chami, 2002). According to Massay (2017), 90 percent of the local *Wandengereko* ethnic group are Muslims; consequently, their cultural practices are strongly shaped by Islamic teachings. Therefore, the traditions of the *Wandengereko*, along with Islamic religious directives, are key considerations in matters related to land.

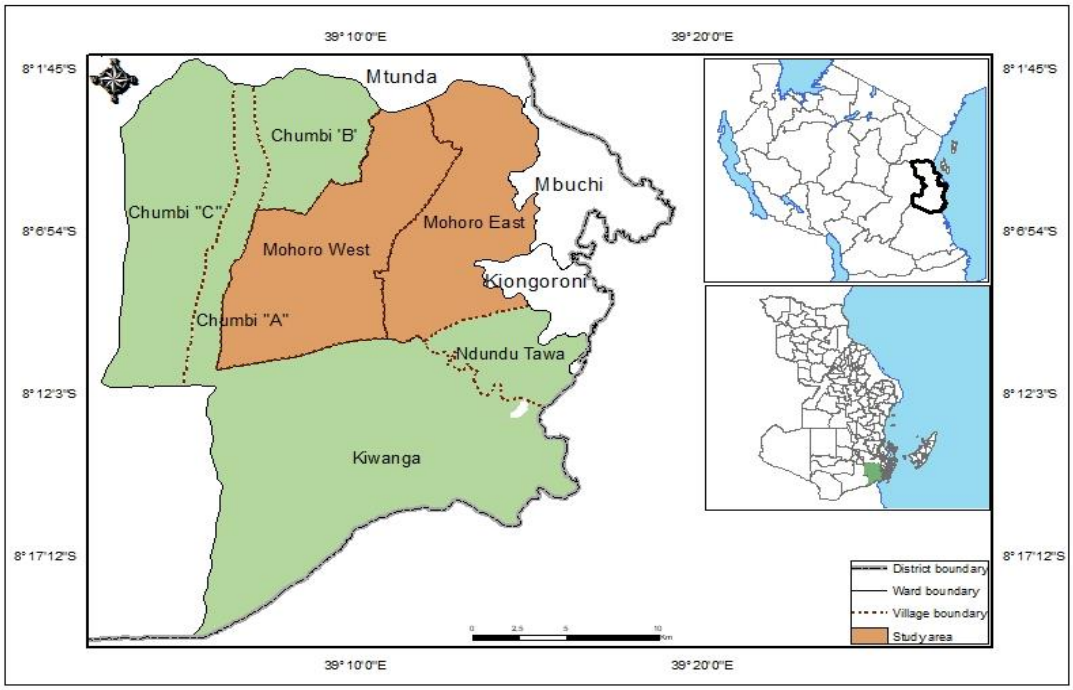

Figure 1: Study Area-Mohoro East and Mohoro West Villages
Source: Mohoro East and Mohoro West Village Office 2021

Four primary data collection methods were employed: in-depth interviews (IDIs), key informant interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observation. A total of 22 participants took part in the study, of which four were primary respondents. These included female residents who shared first-hand accounts of their experiences concerning land access. The remaining 18 were secondary participants who provided supplementary information on women's access to land. Generally, the study participants included the following: Female residents; Male residents, District and Village government leaders involved on land matters; Religious leaders; and in-migrants who have now acquired residence in the villages.

Findings and Discussions

Women's capacities to maintain access to land in the context of multiple land-users was observed to be influenced by the historical transformations of the socioeconomic context of the two villages of Mohoro which was narrated with examples from people's experience before colonialism to the contemporary period. According to the oral history given and other forms of consultations, study participants explained their experiences as it evolved according to the historical time frame as discussed here.

First, the pre-colonial period was explained by elderly male and female residents of the *Wandegereko* community. It was narrated that in the pre-colonial period, land in the areas now known as Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages was primarily used for subsistence agriculture and was considered abundant and fertile. This fertility was attributed to the Rufiji River Basin (RRB), where periodic floods enriched the soil with nutrient-rich silt, creating ideal conditions for agriculture. During these periods, land in the area was categorized into

common and lineage lands, used for settlement and agricultural activities. Lineage land, essential for agriculture, was conceptualized into three categories: uncultivated land, land with crops, and perennial crops such as mango, coconut, and cashew trees. Both men and women had equal access to lineage land for agricultural purposes, reflecting a matrilineal land-use system. This was further emphasized by one of the elderly participants. He said;

> *Land was not a problem at all. Both my female relatives and I were allocated land equally by our parents. For instance, in our family, there are five siblings three women and two men. Each of us received a portion of land from our mother, who herself had been allocated approximately 20 hectares by her own mother (IDI, male, 15/11/ 2022, Mohoro West).*

The process of acquiring lineage land involved communal clearing of primary forest areas, known as *kukecha*, primarily carried out by men. Once cleared, trees were planted at land boundaries to signify ownership, and the land was distributed equally among lineage members, regardless of gender, hence women could gain access to such land, including widows. It was also explained that such lineage-owned lands were widespread, covering various parts of Nyampakupwani, Nyampakubara, Nyampakumashariki, old Mohoro, Sungabara and Sungapwani. Land for women in Mohoro villages was achieved through marriage and family allocation, inheritance. and common property access. An elderly female participant explained:

> *I recall that after I got married and became pregnant with my first child, I was allocated the wigane farm, which I possessed in addition to the piece of land given to me by my mother. Furthermore, I also had access to a portion of common land that had been allocated to me by my aunt, where I cultivated rice. Therefore, I had no difficulty accessing land. The same applied to my two unmarried siblings and another sibling whose husband had passed away; they were each allocated land from our lineage holdings. (IDI, female, 15/3/2024, Mohoro East).*

According to customs, a woman may receive a portion of a *Wigane* farm from the patrilocal residence and also retained land from their mother's family land since many members followed the matrilineal system. Consequently, these women could possess two farms simultaneously. The *Wigane* farm, allocated after a bride conceived, aimed to regulate her sexuality and ensure that resources were passed to legitimate clan members. Under the *Wigane* farm system, wives and husbands maintained separate farms. Women were also expected to assist their husbands on their farms, adding to their responsibilities and reducing time for their own farming and domestic tasks.

Marriage practices were also influenced by both customary traditions and Islamic principles. During the study, 70% of community members identify as Muslim, with the remainder being Christians or followers of traditional beliefs. It was through such influence that even most marriage practices involved two key Islamic components: *Mahr* and *Nikah*. *Mahr* is a gift or contribution, such as money, land, or jewelry, given by the husband to the wife as a token of respect and recognition of her independence. It is transferred before marriage. According to the village Imam, many married women acquired the right to land from *Mahr* as part of marriage systems, contrary to the present time as some contemporary marriages are not contracted

through religious principle. Giving land as part of *Mah*r has however become limited in the present period and it was established that the current competition over land has limited men to give it a priority within *Mahr*.

Divorce was historically rare due to established marital conflict resolution frameworks. Divorced or widowed women over 60, with grown children who already had land, often retained use of their *Wigane* farm. Younger divorced or widowed women often returned to their maternal or paternal homes to access land. Unmarried women relied on family land, which was more accessible when land was abundant.

Inheritance was another means for women to access land, influenced by Islam's principles granting rights to both male and female heirs. Sons and daughters inherited resources equally, including land and trees such as coconut, mango, and cashew, which symbolized land ownership. Elderly women aged 76 and above, alongside men, were observed to own either bare land or a combination of bare land and land with mango, coconut, or cashew trees. This was further elaborated by one of the study participants. He said:

> *I recall that my female siblings and I had equal rights to land. Our parents allocated land to us regardless of gender, and even those who were married were also given their share. Still, this practice began to decline around 2008, when people from other areas started migrating to our village. (IDI, male, 3/11/2022, Mohoro West).*

A third mechanism for land access during this time was common property access, allowing both men and women entry to land, with certain exceptions. Several types of common land also existed, managed by a traditional leader known as the *Mpindo* who was the overall community leader, supported by lineage leaders and *Makungwi. Makungwi were* female traditional elders who also led the coming-off-age training for young girls during *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage. These women oversaw one of the common access areas specifically designed for women, which was called the *Mkoleni* sacred site.

The *Kinyamu* dance is a traditional rite of passage for girls, known as *wali* (plural for *mwali*, meaning "young lady"), marking their transition into womanhood upon experiencing their first menstrual cycle. In the pre-colonial period, the *Kinyamu* ritual extended over several months and involved multiple phases, such as seclusion in the *Mkoleni* area under the guidance of *Makungwi*, who provided instruction on social roles such as being a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and neighbor. During this time, the girls also learned menstrual hygiene and practical skills like making *seke*, large storage containers made from *mingombe* or *mianzi* trees. The *seke* symbolized women's access to benefits from their husbands' land, as they were intended to be filled with produce from the husband's farm, and continued access to these reserves depended on maintaining a good relationship with the man and staying married. The wife managed her *Wigane* farm to produce food for household security, while the husband's farm produced emergency reserves stored in a *seke*. Though, as land scarcity grew, women's access to *Wigane* farms diminished.

Mkoleni access was restricted to women at certain times, and common forest were off-limits under specific conditions, such as menstruation or post-coital activities, to support forest regeneration. The sacred *Mkoleni* area held significant cultural value as a ceremonial site for

the *Kinyamu* dance. This process created a shared identity among women, instilling a collective responsibility to protect and preserve *Mkoleni* as a women's space. This tradition reinforced women's roles in household food security and land use through *seke*, a symbol of accessing their husbands *Wigane* farms. Teaching *seke* making during the *Kinyamu* dance highlighted how cultural practices supported women's access to land and agricultural resources. Moreover, the *Mkoleni* area served as a space for collective female identity and agency, empowering women to protect the site and, by extension, their access to agricultural produce.

Other common lands especially the area located along the Rufiji River and the common forest, located in parts of present-day Nyandote, Mwanani, and Nyautika hamlets were the common property accessed by both men and women for livelihood activities. While men used the common land along the Rufiji river activities such as building resting shelter, women used the area for vegetable gardening, rice farming, and collecting greens. Furthermore, men accessed the common forest for gathering wood for constructing. mud houses. making traditional stools (*vigoda*), and beds (*telemka tukaze*), crafted with materials from trees like the Neem (*Minyaa)*. Women also collected fuel wood for cooking[1].

A significant change was experienced by the coming of colonialism. From the oral accounts given by Mohoro community members, colonial influences altered traditional land access mechanisms. For example, the German colonial administration introduced cotton plantation systems in the area, and in 1906, established a cotton experimental station at Mpanganya to teach cultivation techniques (Sunseri, 2005). Parts of the common lands in present-day Nyamidege and Nyakikai, Nyandote were designated for cotton farming, overseen by *Akida/Jumbe*, local chiefs appointed to enforce colonial policies and collect taxes. A scheme, the Gotzen Cotton Scheme (GCS) was implemented to boost cotton production, followed with coercive measures compelling people into mandatory cotton cultivation. Households were required to grow cotton on two hectares of common land, while the KWK provided seeds and established cotton gins in nearby Msomeni village. This policy led some households to convert lineage lands into cotton farms to meet GCS demands. One of the study participants recalled:

> *My husband was compelled to convert his entire Wigane farm, along with a portion of my Wigane farm, to comply with the Gotzen Cotton Scheme, which was quite complex. This was not because the colonial government physically forced us to do so, but rather because participation in the scheme necessitated such compliance. Traditionally, women were and continue to be expected to ensure food security within their households. I recall struggling immensely to fulfill this role, as we did not have enough food to sustain us throughout the year. (IDI, female, 2/3/2024, Mohoro West).*

The compulsory head tax targeting adult males that was introduced forced many into this decision. This weakened the traditional *Wigane* farm system, which granted married women

[1] "*Telemka tukaze*" (literally meaning "step down in order to fasten") implied the rudimentary structures of the beds that required continuous maintenance, necessitating constant access to the forest for materials used in making such beds.

usufruct rights, by prioritizing male-centered taxation and economic goals. For instance, the German colonial mandate requiring households to cultivate two hectares of cotton disrupted women's informal land rights, converting lineage lands previously used for food crops into cotton farms. Women, who formed the majority of subsistence farmers, faced challenges ensuring household food supplies as land use shifted from food production to cotton farming.

Furthermore, the *Mkoleni* sacred sites, central to the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage, were disrupted due to compulsory school enrollments following the establishment of Mohoro Primary School and household engagement in cotton cultivation under colonial policies. The shortened *Kinyamu* dance diminished its traditional role in securing women's access to land and its symbolic connection to the *seke.*

After Tanzania's independence in 1961, colonial agricultural directives were discontinued in Mohoro and became replaced by diversified production under socialist self-reliance policies, including the *Ujamaa* program (1967–1985). Land was differently perceived as strategic crops like sugarcane were promoted, requiring each household to cultivate two hectares on lineage lands. In this case new land use systems were introduced on lands which were traditionally used for food crops. This further affected *Wigane* farms system as some pieces of land used for food crops were used for sugarcane cultivation threatening household food security.

On the other hand, unmarried, widowed and divorced women were also affected as lands which would have been allocated to them for food crops production through customary system were largely converted into cotton farms. Yet, the post-independence land systems honored unmarried, widowed, and divorced women who gained autonomy by being registered as independent land owners, a privilege often denied to married women, as lands were registered under male household heads. Married women's land access was thus controlled by male household heads, leaving them with limited agency and ownership rights. This dynamic reflects the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal systems that concentrate economic power in men's hands (Chigbu, 2019). This experience was asserted by a participant, who said:

> *The Ujamaa policy introduced new directives concerning land use. We were instructed to cultivate sugarcane on our lineage land which grow well on land which is neither particularly dry nor wet, unlike areas around the common land that remain wet for most of the year. I complied with this directive, as every household in the village was obligated to do so. This policy had a significant impact on us, as we were forced to adopt new land use systems that, to some extent, compromised household food security. The land previously used for growing food crops was reduced in order to make space for sugarcane cultivation (IDI, male, 10/3/2024, Mohoro East).*

In addition, aimed at fostering economic reform and reducing colonial economic dependency, *Ujamaa* emphasized collective agricultural production and in the process designated key cash crops like sugarcane were extended for cultivation on ancestral lands. This shift from subsistence to cash-crop farming mirrored colonial practices, as state economic interests once again overshadowed local food production needs. Women's traditional access to land through *Wigane* farms and family allocations diminished, undermining their capacity to ensure

household food security. The reorganization of land ownership under *Ujamaa* redefined ancestral lands as quasi-private property managed by village authorities (Ergas, 1980).

On top of these developments, the Education for All policy of 1974, which made compulsory primary and adult education, further disrupted traditional practices, including the *Kinyamu* dance. The mandatory enrollment of children aged seven and adult literacy programs reshaped community priorities, and also reduced the prominence of the cultural role of both *Kinyamu* dance and *Mkoleni* sacred sites. one of the participants said:

> *I was one of the Makungwi. During the implementation of the Education for All policy, it became increasingly difficult to gather enough girls for the Kinyamu dance. I recall one occasion when we had only four girls available, which was insufficient to hold the dance, as it was not considered viable with such a small number. This decline was largely due to the fact that many of the new teachers did not emphasize the importance of the dance to the girls. In most cases, they discouraged participation, as they did not understand the cultural significance of the dance within our community particularly its role in transmitting indigenous knowledge, such as seke making. This skill is essential, as it symbolizes a woman's ability to maintain access to her husband's land after marriage (IDI, female, 5/4/2024, Mohoro West).*

Hence, social and economic changes led to the villages experiencing significant changes in community composition which created diverse meanings about land and likewise, led to diverse land use systems. Increased government presence, by the 1990s driven by institutional expansions, further transformed the social set up in the villages. The Mohoro WEO explained that in the 1990 many people from outside the area came and settled in the villages, each having some impact on the ownership of land. For example, he said:

> *Mohoro Secondary School was expanded in 1994, leading to an increase in both staff and student enrollment. In 1998, a natural resources inspection checkpoint and a livestock officer were introduced to control illegal logging activities and manage displaced pastoral communities. By 2022, approximately 120 civil servants had been stationed in these villages, supported by access to urban amenities. (KII, WEO,7/4/2024, Mohoro West).*

Population growth and influx of newcomers in the villages impacted land use of the agricultural land including extended forest exploitation, and community practices influenced by cultural diversity, and economic activities. Related, there was increasing demand for modern housing with galvanized roofs, modern furniture, and charcoal as a cooking fuel drove further forest exploitation. Logging for construction and furniture-making therefore grew. Extensive logging continued despite the establishment of the National Forest and Beekeeping Policies in 1998, Illegal logging was facilitated by village leaders and over-harvesting by those exceeding licensed quotas, often enabled through bribery. Illegally harvested timber meant that traditional uses and access to land-based resources were diminished, and women, as the men, could not have satisfactory benefits from the land.

Moreover, unproductive trees and withered tree branches, which are commonly used by women as sources of cooking fuel, were extensively utilized for both charcoal production, construction and furniture making. This made it difficult for women who are responsible in firewood collection widely used in the village as a source of cooking fuel to use long time in search for the former instead of working on their farm for household food security. this as further reported by one of the study participants jeopardized most households' food security. she said:

> *Nowadays, I spend the entire day collecting firewood, which I use as cooking fuel in my household. The situation was not like this in the past, before the arrival of newcomers to our village. As a result, I no longer have sufficient time to work on my farm, which negatively affects my crop yields. (IDI, female, 12/3/2024, Mohoro West).*

The influx of people in Mohoro reached a high level with the coming of pastoralists in 2008, evicted from Ihefu in Mbarali district Mbeya region and Kilombero wetlands in Morogoro regions. Mohoro WEO gave an account of this on this. He said;

> *We were instructed by the District authorities to receive mixed farmers from the Ihefu and Kilombero wetlands. In total, the villages accommodated at least 150 mixed farmers, each owning a minimum of 60 animals, primarily cattle, goats, and donkeys. Many were allocated land in the common forest, while others purchased plots from local residents or settled on land presumed to be unoccupied. Accommodating such a large number of people and livestock at once was challenging. Consequently, we are now experiencing a significant number of land-related conflicts, both between mixed farmers and local residents and within families. Some male family members have secretly sold portions of family land to mixed farmers, a practice that has reduced the amount of land available to the detriment of female residents particularly those who are unmarried, divorced, or widowed who rely solely on family land for their livelihoods. (IDI, female, 18/2/ 2024, Mohoro West).*

The villages' fertile land also attracted domestic investors, especially those involved in watermelon and sesame cultivation. Watermelon, alongside sesame, became a lucrative cash crop transported to urban areas like Dar es Salaam and Morogoro.

Population growth and demand of land for cash crops and settlement contributed to the growing commodification of land. By 2008, incidents of unlawful land allocations and the sale of lineage lands were reported across various hamlets, driven by the rising demand from mixed farmers who established farms and settlements. Agricultural practices also shifted, with traditional subsistence farming giving way to large-scale sesame cultivation by mixed farmers, ranging from 10 to 20 hectares. Sesame emerged as a key cash crop, in the communities but its success intensified land competition between local residents and mixed farmers, with many seeking land in upland areas or leasing plots in neighbouring Shela village, which is situated in uplands and support sesame cultivation. However, women faced challenges in leasing such land due to landlords' preferences for male farmers with greater financial capacity. This was elaborated by one of the study participants. She narrated:

> *Beginning in 2010, leasing land for the cultivation of cash crops became increasingly common and eventually established as a widespread practice. However, most landowners are reluctant to lease plots smaller than five hectares, a requirement that is often financially inaccessible for many female residents. While land competition affects both male and female residents negatively particularly in their efforts to compete with mixed farmers for land used in sesame production in Shela village most male residents are at least able to meet the lease terms for five or more hectares. In contrast, many female residents face greater challenges due to their limited ability to afford such leasing conditions. For example, I once applied to lease a single acre of land in Shela village for sesame cultivation. Despite my persistence, the landowner a woman refused to grant the lease (IDI, female, 20/3/ 2024, Mohoro West).*

This situation suggests that some female landowners benefited from these developments and were able to maximize revenue from their land, despite the increasing commodification of land driven by the shift of sesame cultivation from subsistence to a commercial activity. These women capitalized on leasing opportunities that arose from this transformation. However, other landless women were unable to take advantage of the improved access to land, as they had to compete with wealthier individuals for leasing rights.

The completion of the Mkapa Bridge in 2003 was another significant marker in the opening up of southern Tanzania by enhancing connectivity, reducing transportation costs, and promoting trade. It contributed to economic growth by improving access to markets, attracting investment, and supporting migration for commercial activities in both Mohoro East and Mohoro West. This led to an increase in ppopulation influx into Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages, and so did land became increasingly commercialized leading to heightened gender and socioeconomic disparities. Wealthier individuals, such as mixed farmers and civil servants, gained larger landholdings, deepening economic inequality. This was elaborated more by a study participant. She said;

> *Land is increasingly becoming more competitive due to the recent influx of people of various backgrounds into our villages. Most of these newcomers possess greater financial resources than the majority of both male and female residents, thereby intensifying disparities in the ability to maintain access to land. (IDI, female, 24/1/2024, Mohoro East).*

Women, especially those with limited financial independence, faced challenges in participating in this market-driven land economy. Additionally, changes in agricultural practices and land use are depleting local resources, such as through logging and charcoal production, making it harder for women to access essential resources for farming and cooking. The rise of commercial agriculture further intensifies competition for land and forest products, placing added pressure on women.

The post-independence experience of women and land in Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages illustrate several gender-related issues. These findings suggest that state-led

development and economic growth policies sometimes fail to recognize women's land rights and their vital role in subsistence farming if they disregard production systems that had sustained communities over time, and in particular sustaining women's access to land. While the state aimed for equitable resource access, the outcomes were shaped by gender, power, and economic dynamics. For example, despite the enactment of the Land Act of 1999 and the Village Land Act of 1999, which emphasize land access equality to foster socio economic development, women's access to land has remained subordinate to state economic priorities such as the promotion of commercial farming. This is clearly illustrated in Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages, where approximately 3,200 hectares of land were allocated to Sugar Plant Company Limited for the establishment of a commercial farm, thereby undermining women's ability to maintain access to land. The area allocated to the company had previously been used by both men and women for various purposes. Women in particular depended on the land for rice cultivation and vegetable gardening to support household sustenance. Following the land acquisition, these women were forced to relocate to areas along the Sunga Dam, which were inadequate for green vegetable gardening.

Conclusions

This study illustrates the intricate and evolving dynamics of women's access to land in rural Tanzania in the context of multiple land users, which is shaped by the interplay of historical processes of institutional, cultural, and economic factors. The study illustrates how patriarchal systems, and capitalist economic structures intersect to limit women's access to land. Capitalist-driven land commodification transforms land from a communal resource into a market-oriented asset, benefiting more resourced individuals and exacerbating economic inequalities. Within this framework, women's land rights are subordinated to state-led economic objectives and male-dominated family structures. Access to land in Mohoro East and West also became increasingly complex due to demographic changes, partly population growth but also influx and settlement of people from other areas in the country, which also facilitated cultural interactions with diverse communities, each possessing different perspectives on land use. This had an implication on women's abilities to maintain the different channels of access to land.

The study thus highlights the gendered impacts of environmental and socio-cultural disruptions. The breakdown of traditional land allocation systems, such as the *Wigane* and lineage-based mechanisms, along with women's exclusion from sacred cultural sites, undermined their economic autonomy and ecological knowledge. These processes increased rural women's vulnerability, particularly as access to essential resources becomes increasingly tied to financial power and political influence.

The study concludes that women's access to land in contemporary rural Tanzania continues to be shaped by historical processes and socio-economic transformations which sometimes challenge women's ability to maintain access to land especially when population is diversified. Addressing these challenges requires a critical re-evaluation of land governance policies to ensure that women's contributions to land management, subsistence farming, and cultural preservation are recognized and protected. By prioritizing women's rights in land reform agendas, policymakers can work to reduce gender disparities and promote sustainable rural livelihoods.

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