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## Joint Land Certification, Gendered Preferences, and Land Related Decisions: Are Wives Getting More Involved?

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### Abstract<sup>1</sup>

*We investigate whether joint land certification in southern Ethiopia has contributed to a strengthening of the perceived land rights of women and an increase in their intra-household involvement in land-related decisions. We use gender-disaggregated household panel data and generate indices for wives' and husbands' land rights attitudes and for wives' involvement in land related decisions. We find that receipt of land certificate has strengthened wives' awareness of their land rights. Intra-household bargaining and intra-community social processes contribute to stronger involvement of wives in land related decisions within households.*

**JEL codes:** Q15, J16, D03.

**Key words:** joint land certification, gender, empowerment of wives, Ethiopia.

### Introduction

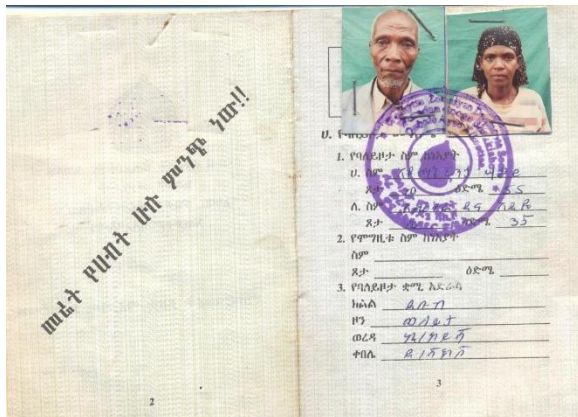
Gender discrimination in land distribution and rights is widespread in many parts of the world, including Africa. The policy goal of gender equity may, therefore, need a stronger focus on female land rights as such rights have been found to enhance women's decision power within households. Several recent land tenure reforms have, therefore, attempted to strengthen women's land rights also within households.

Ethiopia has undertaken new land tenure reforms since the late 1990s aiming to enhance household tenure security and individual land rights. One major component of these reforms involves issuing joint land certificates to husbands and wives in some regions of the country. Positive effects of the low cost land registration and certification on tenure security of farmers in Ethiopia are now

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well documented. However, intra-household effects have not yet been well researched in regions in which empowerment of women through joint certification of husbands and wives has been emphasised. The objective of this paper is to investigate the effects of joint land certification on the awareness and preferences of men and women and on wives' position and their empowerment regarding land within households. Such insights may potentially be used to identify ways to further refine the reforms.



**Figure 1. Inside a joint land certificate from SNNP region, Ethiopia**

## Hypotheses

We set out to test the following hypotheses about joint land certification and the empowerment of women in Ethiopia:

H1. The joint land certification reform has strengthened wives' awareness of their land rights (awareness effect).

H2. The land certification reform aiming to strengthen women's land rights within households is blocked by men/husbands who prefer that women retain their traditional weak land rights.

H3. Wives' preferences for strengthened land rights of women positively influence, and husbands' preferences for the traditional position of women negatively influence, the degree of involvement of women in land related decisions (bargaining effect).

H4. The within community extent of joint land certification enhances the within household involvement in land related decisions (social process hypothesis).

## Context and data

This paper builds on research in two regions in southern Ethiopia, where joint land certificates for husbands and wives have been issued since 2005, based on new land laws that were enacted starting in 2004. Women have traditionally had a weak position in the patriarchal societies of southern Ethiopia and have generally been considered the property

of men, as evidenced by the payment of bride prizes, arranged marriages where girls typically had very little influence on whom they would marry, requirements of widows to remarry the brother of the late husband to remain on household land, and the kidnapping of young girls as a common traditional method of obtaining a wife in some communities. The step from being mere property to becoming an equal owner can therefore be long and difficult, even with legal reforms that support women's equal land rights. To measure women's empowerment in relation to land management, we have used the extent of participation and influence in a set of land management decisions, including crop choice and land rental decisions.

We benefit from a detailed baseline survey, conducted in 2007 when the reform was underway, that focuses particularly on the intra-household and gender effects of the reform. The survey covered more than 600 households in five districts in Oromia and SNNP Regions. The baseline survey included separate interviews of husbands and wives. The interviews were repeated in 2012 with some modifications.

## **Main findings**

By 2007, the 2005 reform has had some, albeit small, impact on women's ability to influence farm management. The relatively small effect may be due to the strong tradition of male dominance in household-farm decision-making. By 2012, it appears that women have become more involved in farm management decisions, in particular, in crop choice and land rental decisions. Our findings support the hypothesis that the joint land registration and certification reform has enhanced women's awareness of their rights after we have controlled for endogeneity of land certification using a control function approach. The proportion of wives who claim for all their land rights increased from 41 per cent in 2007 to 72 per cent in 2012. On the other hand, about 36 percent of the husbands do not attempt to retain any of their dominant positions by claiming any of the traditional weak rights of wives. The wives' participation in land related decisions increases with the share of households in the community having land certificates and is positively correlated with attendance in land reform meetings. We thus find evidence of awareness effects, intra-household bargaining effects and social process effects

that have contributed to empowerment of wives in relation to land.

## Conclusion

We conclude that the joint land certification reform in southern Ethiopia has positively influence women's favourable attitudes towards strengthened land rights of women and that this development has contributed to increased involvement of women in land related decision making. Our study provides evidence of awareness effects, intra-household bargaining effects and intra-village social process effects that jointly have contributed to strengthen the involvement of women in land related decision beyond the expectations of the respondents five year earlier. Issuance of joint land certificates appears therefore to have been a useful policy tool to promote more equal land rights and has increased the involvement of women in land related decisions within households. Our study covers very diverse farming systems and different ethnic groups in Ethiopia, indicating that our findings are applicable to diverse socio-economic conditions. The findings may therefore be generalized to other areas in Ethiopia and perhaps other parts of Africa. The low cost land registration

and certification approach in Ethiopia can provide useful insights for other African countries, although it is always important to design reforms that fit local contexts, as there is no guarantee that success in one location can be replicated elsewhere. However, patrilineal inheritance systems and virilocal marriage systems are also dominating in other African countries where women are in a weak bargaining position over land within households. Our findings should therefore be of more general relevance. Piloting and adjusting designs of tenure reforms in a step-wise fashion is in any case important to increase the chances of success and prevent large scale failures.

## Full paper link:

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