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Reducing VAWG in Land and Housing

Tags: VAWG, WEE, Housing, Land. Case Study

Creating safe and inclusive urban environments is a top priority for UK government, who have signed up to several international commitments in this area, including Sustainable Development Goal 11 to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', with a target that directly contributes to addressing women and girls' safety in public spaces.

Violence and the threat of violence holds back economic growth in urban areas, limiting women's mobility, access to economic opportunities, and the ability to move into higher paid or more secure jobs. The cost of violence against women ranges from 1.4% to 3.7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to recent costing studies within developing country contexts.



Land and Housing Rights

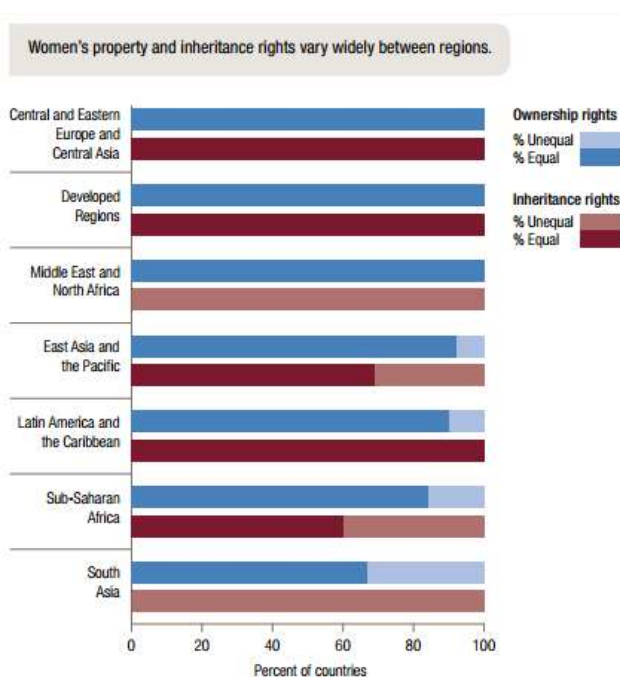
Securing rights to land and housing as a key to empowerment, through effective institutional and legal frameworks

Risks of violence against women and girls relating to land and housing

Insecure dwellings in communities with high crime rates and few security patrols can exacerbate women's vulnerability to burglary, theft and rape in their own homes. Recent migrants are often particularly vulnerable to attacks from strangers and are less able to seek protection from neighbours.¹

Overcrowding in the home and the 'stress-inducing' conditions associated with it can trigger intimate partner violence and domestic violence.² For example, research with indigenous Mexican women found that overcrowding, lack of privacy, and relations with the husband's in-laws (who often live in the same household) were key factors exacerbating violence and family arguments.³

Evictions/displacement as a result of urbanisation or infrastructure projects can increase violence and insecurity for women. Women can be forced into precarious housing situations, having to compromise their safety and forced to adopt risky coping mechanisms.⁴ For example, rapid urban development has led to hundreds of thousands of people being forcibly evicted from their homes in Rio, Brazil. These displacements have exposed women and girls to higher levels of violence, sexual abuse, exploitation of children and young people, and people trafficking.⁵



Women's lack of land and property ownership weakens their defence against domestic violence and keeps them in abusive relationships.⁶ In Kerala, India, research shows that women who own land or a house (but especially the latter) are much less likely to experience violence. Women's ownership of property is seen as a 'tangible exit option', which strengthens women's bargaining power in marriage, acting as a deterrent to

¹ Chant (2013)

² McIlwaine (2015)

³ Peña et al (2014)

⁴ Norwegian Refugee Council (2014)

⁵ ActionAid (2014)

⁶ Chant (2013); McIlwaine (2015)

marital violence.⁷ However, estimates show that women represent less than 15% of land and property owners worldwide.⁸

Discriminatory inheritance rights are a form of economic violence in itself, and can lead to threats and acts of violence if a woman refuses to leave her house. Widows and orphans are particularly at risk of 'property grabbing'. The practice of early marriage means that young brides who marry older husbands are facing widowhood at an earlier age. At least 115 countries specifically recognize women's property rights on equal terms to men, but this varies considerably by region (see diagram)⁹.

What are the key opportunities and promising practice?

Although there have been various studies highlighting the need for land and housing programmes to address women's safety and experiences of violence in urban areas, the evidence base on interventions that work in low and middle-income countries remains limited. Some key opportunities include:

Emergency shelters for women escaping violence are designed to accommodate women and children while they consider their options, and make alternative arrangements. Some shelters limit the amount of time a woman can stay, while others do not. Shelters can provide food and clothing to women; coordinate the delivery of services to them; provide women with therapy and counselling; help women find employment and access healthcare; and even campaign on violence against women. Indeed, a number of studies have found that the more types of services women use while in shelter, the more likely they are to live independently post-shelter.¹⁰ Experts recommend that legislation should mandate a shelter/safe space for every 10,000 members of the population, which can accommodate survivors and their children for emergency stays, and which will help them to find a refuge for longer stays.¹¹

Long-term housing options (mandated by law) tend to be limited in most countries. However, there are a few examples of good practice. For example, in Slovenia, the Housing Act ensures that survivors of domestic violence are eligible for publicly funded or non-profit rented housing.¹² Brazil, Cambodia, India and Serbia have enacted legislation which provides for the right of a victim of domestic violence to remain in the family home and for the perpetrator to be removed.¹³ While legislation is important, it needs to be accompanied by consistent and adequate funding to be effective. In Mongolia, for example, the domestic violence legislation refers in several places to placing domestic violence survivors in shelters, but there is only one shelter in the country.¹⁴

Reform of discriminatory laws which deny a woman's right to inherit and/or own land and other property is also important for reducing women's vulnerability to violence.

Case study: Reform of discriminatory land/housing laws, Rwanda

Rwanda began an ambitious land tenure reform programme in 2004, which aimed to increase tenure security for all landowners and, in particular, eliminate discrimination in the case of women. New legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks were established, and a land registration process was implemented that aimed to be participatory and community led. Legally, the reforms enabled women to deal in and inherit land, and provided protection for their rights through the deed. Legally married couples are now both required to be present when registering land, to ensure that they are registered as joint property owners, allowing women equal rights. Reform of land registration also affected inheritance, requiring both male and female children to be registered as individuals with a beneficial interest in their parents' land. Following the revisions to the law, UN Women have supported 15,000 women to register to inherit and own land and property.

(Source: UN Women, 2013b)

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⁷ Panda and Agarwal (2005)

⁸ Chant (2013)

⁹ Source of diagram: UN Women (2011), p.39. UN Women calculated regional averages using women's right to ownership and inheritance World Bank data from 124 countries. Even where women have constitutional guarantees of land rights, customary law can take precedence on issues of inheritance and marriage.

¹⁰ Jewkes (2014); Sullivan (2012)

¹¹ See [UN Handbook 3.6.1](#) and UN Women guidance on [shelter](#)

¹² UN Women (2015a)

¹³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014)

¹⁴ The Advocates for Human Rights / National Center Against Violence (2013)