

## WOMEN RECLAIM LAND AND PROPERTY RIGHTS: A HOUSING INITIATIVE IN HARARE BY THE ZIMBABWE PARENTS OF HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (ZPHCA)

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### Introduction

Realizing land and property rights is an important step towards sustainable development.. It is also an integral aspect of poverty reduction, especially for the purposes of addressing social, political, and economic dimensions of gender inequality. Land is a primary means for generating livelihood and a main vehicle for investing and accumulating wealth. On this premise, the Government of Zimbabwe has, since independence in 1980, been formulating policies, legislation and programmes to ensure equity and equality in terms land and property ownership between men and women across all ages.

However despite these efforts, land and property rights for women in Zimbabwe remain elusive. There is a great need for development agencies to emphasize programming initiatives that will ensure the fulfillment of women's rights to property. This case study elaborates on one of the most innovative practices that the Zimbabwe Parents of Handicapped Children Association (ZPHCA) has been implementing. It aspires to ensure that government authorities respect, protect and fulfill of the rights of women, guaranteeing grassroots women access to and control of land, property and housing.

### Overview of the Women's Land and Property Rights in Zimbabwe

In 1985, the government of Zimbabwe enacted the Matrimonial Causes Act which recognized women as property owners independent of their fathers or husbands. Since 1980, three phases of land reform have been formulated and implemented, with all having employed a patriarchal model that perpetuates existing gender disparities in terms of land and property ownership. In 2013, Zimbabwe developed a new Constitution which stresses the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for women in all facets. Despite these policy and legislative changes, the plight of women with regard to land and property rights in Zimbabwe remains an issue. Women's access to land remains restricted through marriage or linkages with other male family members. Land administration in rural areas remains patriarchal, with male chiefs who often work with male village heads to distribute land according to male family names. This process marginalizes women who become unable to maximize their potential as far as land and property are concerned. This situation perpetuates social inequity and delays the progression of sustainable community development. It is within this context that ZPHCA mobilizes grassroots women who

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are mothers of children with disabilities to advocate for the fulfillment of their rights to land, property, and housing.

### **ZPHCA's Housing Scheme**

ZPHCA has been successfully implementing initiatives aimed at empowering grassroots women who are mothers of children with disabilities by ensuring the fulfillment of their rights to land and property. Most of these grassroots women are single mothers who were left by their husbands when they gave birth to a child with a disability, or who were widowed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic or another illness. Others are housewives living with their husbands and family but not gainfully employed, as they are usually preoccupied with caring for their children with disabilities who need close attention.

These economic and social challenges characterize the living circumstances for members of ZPHCA. Just like many other women in Zimbabwe, they cannot afford to acquire land and property through purchasing, as the system would require. Some of the women who were left by their husbands after giving birth to children with disabilities were chased from their matrimonial homes and found themselves back in their parents' homes, depending on them for sustenance. At their parents' homes they are vulnerable to issues such as family violence or inheritance conflicts with other family members. In other cases, women just rent accommodation, facing rejection and discrimination towards them and their children by fellow tenants or landlords. This forces these grassroots women to live a nomadic life, moving from one house to another within short time periods in the hope of finding a home where they can be accepted with their disabled children.

During their periodic meetings, ZPHCA members agreed that the most pressing challenge facing them was the lack of proper and permanent accommodation; none of the women had a house to their name. They also agreed that this issue has a domino effect on their livelihoods, social status, and position as women in their communities. They could not establish sustainable income generating initiatives, as they are constantly moving from one place to another.

After identifying and agreeing on their common challenges, ZPHCA members mobilized each other and brainstormed how they could solve the issues at hand. The idea of a housing scheme emerged as a means of engaging in comprehensive advocacy and lobbying for access to proper housing facilities - a key step towards improving their living conditions. This housing scheme targeted about 100 members who were mothers of children with a disability. The process of identifying a common problem and collectively coming up with solution reflects the importance of a participatory approach to development programming; it allows beneficiaries to use their social capital and come up with their own viable solutions to their own challenges. As a result, whatever intervention in which they decide to engage will be responsive to their needs.

The housing scheme became a strategy through which ZPHCA linked themselves to their local authorities with whom they aimed to engage in dialogue to negotiate access to proper housing. They also used the scheme to influence policies, plans and programmes at various levels of government to address various development concerns and priorities from a human rights perspective. The grassroots women also used the housing scheme as an opportunity to learn

about their various rights (especially their right to own land and property) both as women and mothers of children with disabilities. They also sought to boost their capabilities to engage in advocacy and lobbying with local leaders for access to resources such as land and property to which they are entitled as women.

From there, the women went through a number of training sessions. They were trained on leadership, financial management and business management. These trainings were meant to empower women so that they could become leaders in their spheres of influence and also engage in progressive entrepreneurial activities and empowering themselves financially.



Grassroots women discussing land and property rights issues at the women's movement constitution.

They were also trained on the structural and procedural aspects of forming co-operatives and running them; this involved the drafting, registering, and operationalizing co-operative constitutions. The grass roots women were also trained on the various women's rights constituency issues and various civic engagement strategies to advocate and campaign for the fulfillment of their rights. Many grassroots women do not have knowledge of their rights to land and property. Even if they do, they often lack the courage to claim those rights due to the various patriarchal traditional practices in which they are entangled that make it difficult for them to exercise their legal rights. After going through this training, grassroots women became empowered with all of the necessary knowledge for effective civic engagement.

A number of local governance officials participated in ZPHCA's advocacy meetings, including the Local Councilor for Glen View, the Housing Manager for the Harare City municipality, the Mayor of the City of Harare, and the Chief and Headmen for Domboshava rural district, among others.

As a result of their advocacy and lobbying activities, ZPCHA managed to acquire residential stands for the targeted 100 grassroots women. They are currently working in collaboration with the City of Harare housing authorities to ensure that the land is developed so they can take occupancy of the new space. In Domboshava ZPHCA also engaged the traditional leaders (the Chief and Headmen) and were allocated a piece of land on which to implement their income generating projects. This has positively impacted on the lives of Domboshava women, who now have land under their ownership and are implementing income generating projects for better livelihoods, addressing the twin struggles of land and property rights and poor livelihoods challenges. This advocacy work helped integrate the work of traditional and political leaders, as well as local authorities, in the fight for women empowerment, emancipation and gender equality.

The establishment of ZPHCA's Housing Initiative was a great stride, which has resulted to the establishment of more sustainable partnerships with various stakeholders, especially government departments. As a result, these grassroots women have engrained themselves in policy making to influence programmes, policies and legislations that affect their access to land and property and other services. Use of non-confrontational advocacy strategies such as dialogue were also a key factor contributing to the success of the initiative and its establishment of partnerships with government stakeholders.

The Housing Initiative has not only resulted in grassroots women having access to land for residential stands but has also proven itself to be a tool for empowerment. It has demonstrated that if grass roots women mobilize each other, get equipped with knowledge and skills, organize themselves and collaborate, and speak out with a collective voice, they have the ability to drive policy change that responds to their needs, concerns and priorities. In this regard, organizations working for the empowerment of grassroots women can draw lessons and provide tools for other to map their needs and use them for policy advocacy as demands.

### **Key learning points**

In September 2014, interviews were conducted with the local authorities (a Glen View councilor and the Harare City Council Housing Manager) and three ZPHCA members and beneficiaries. The local authorities were asked about the role they played in the project and what influenced them to act. They were also asked about the mechanisms that should be put in place to ensure sustainability and scaling up for the housing initiative, as well as to secure the fulfillment of the rights of women to land and property rights in other circles. The grass roots women were asked about their participation in the project, the challenges that influenced them to mobilize themselves and how the initiative has empowered them. Following are some of the key learning points that were drawn from the interviews.





ZPHCA participated in the lobbying and advocacy for the rights of disabled people at the National Disability Expo

In the interview that was conducted with the Glen View Ward 32 Councilor, the Councilor emphasized the following learning points:

- It was important for local authorities, traditional leaders, parliament representatives and government bureaucrats to be conversant in the main challenges affecting grass roots women and empathize with them, if they are to be responsive to locally initiated strategies for women empowerment.
- The involvement and the support of public authorities is key to ensuring the sustainability of any empowerment programming
- Public authorities should address issues relating to grassroots women's empowerment from a human rights perspective and a basic needs approach.
- Collaborative efforts by development stakeholders and agencies are key to ensuring effective, efficient and sustainable grassroots women empowerment.

In the interview that was conducted with the Harare City Municipality Housing Manager, who is a woman, the following learning points were emphasized:

- The presence of women in public offices makes it easy for grassroots women's empowerment programmes to be effective, efficient and sustainable.
- The participation of grassroots women (the target beneficiaries of development programmes) in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development initiatives that concern them is key to ensuring responsiveness and suitability.

- When grassroots women come together, mobilize themselves to form groups, stand and speak out for their rights, concerns and priorities, success is guaranteed.
- For grass roots women to have sustainable fulfillment of their rights to land and property rights, they should be committed to continued pragmatic advocacy and lobbying.
- Owning land and property is a key achievement for grassroots women, as they can establish livelihoods around their permanent residence.

Of the three ZPHCA members and participants, one was interviewed at the place where she rents in the Harare high density suburb of Mbare. The other two were interviewed at the site where the grass roots women were allocated 100 stands.

The first woman who is the Deputy Chair-person and beneficiary of ZPHCA named Mary Mutomba stressed that:

- Fulfillment of the right of women to land and property rights is a key form of empowerment of grass roots women.
- Unless women are empowered, the reduction of poverty in developing communities will remain a pipe dream. Grassroots women are those most affected by absolute poverty, and these effects are felt most acutely by their children.

The second woman interviewed was the Chair-person and beneficiary of ZPHCA named Mediate Munhenzva. Her key learnings included:

- The fulfillment of the land and property rights of grassroots women is a great stride towards the addressing the various social, economic and political challenges that they face in both the private and public domains.
- If grassroots women are given the platform to speak and are empowered with knowledge about their rights they can take charge of their world and influence policies for the better of not only themselves but the better of men and children.

The third woman who is the Secretary of ZPHCA and a member and beneficiary of the housing scheme named Josehpina Mudirira. She emphasized the following learning points:

- The various challenges that grassroots women face must not be a reason for them to cry but rather to be a source of inspiration for them to mobilize each other, come together, stand and speak out for their right to a better living confronting all structural factors that deny them the fulfillment of these rights.
- Buy in of men is key for the success of all initiatives aimed at empowerment of grass roots women.

## Conclusion

ZPHCA's housing scheme represents best practice for enabling grassroots women to claim the fulfillment of their rights to land and property ownership in form of housing stands. Mobilizing grassroots women, equipping them with knowledge about their rights, and training them in advocacy skills are key strategies for empowering them to be policy influencers and owners of

property. It is clear that the participation of grassroots women as beneficiaries of women's empowerment initiatives is key to ensuring responsiveness and sustainability. Participation also enables women to take charge of their world and influence policies – not only for themselves, but for the good of all humankind.