COMMUNITY-BASED LEGAL VOLUNTEERS IN ACTION
Partnership

Who are the partners?
The Paralegal Support and Evaluation program is a partnership of the Luwero Land Rights Activists Association (LLRAA), Uganda Land Alliance (ULA), and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) that aims to support women’s property rights by implementing a focused “paralegal” program in Luwero District.

Early Activities

This partnership began in 2009 and it was during this time that ULA and ICRW trained twenty male and female community members in Luwero District in gender and property rights, dispute resolution techniques, and Ugandan statutory law related to property rights. The trainees took on the unofficial role of “paralegal” within their communities and provided education, legal advice, and mediation services on property rights issues, including women’s property rights. The ultimate goal of the program was to improve the knowledge and attitudes of community members toward women’s property rights. A 2011 evaluation of this program found that the paralegals’ efforts to raise awareness on women’s property rights was using too many different messages, and had been shared across too wide a geographical area in Luwero.

Approach

What did we try to do?
In July 2012, the partnership undertook a new phase that increased the focus on sensitizing communities about women’s property rights. Each paralegal had been expected to focus on promoting the same 3 specific key messages on women’s property rights within their assigned villages, using a range of community education and engagement techniques, and working with influential persons in the community to support the community education efforts. The three key messages on women’s property rights were: 1) Women can own land; 2) Widows and girls can inherit property; and 3) Protect your family by writing a will.

Evaluation

ICRW also carried out an evaluation of this new phase of the program. The goal was to understand how well the program:

- developed paralegals’ understanding of and ability to communicate key messages about women’s property rights;
- encouraged paralegals to try new community sensitization approaches; and
- created a working relationship between the paralegals and selected opinion leaders, or “persons of influence” to promote knowledge and awareness of women’s property rights within communities.

The evaluation also aimed to identify some of the early results of the paralegals’ work on women’s property rights in their communities.
Findings
What happened?

Among Individuals
- Paralegals reported an increased understanding of the law as it pertains to women's property rights, and increased confidence in explaining what is meant by women's property rights and, in particular, the key messages. Paralegals stressed that the program’s formal trainings and ongoing consultations with ULA staff helped them to be effective in their activities. In addition, male and female paralegals expressed that the work helped them gain respect and status in the community:

“I am not yet tired and I enjoy my work. It has helped to emancipate us as women and also keeps me busy and active in the community. I am respected in the community and acquired a lot of knowledge and experience which I would otherwise not have got if it was not for this work.”
— Female paralegal, LC1

- Some male community members who attended sensitizations hosted by the paralegals gained a greater understanding of women’s property rights. For example, some men were better able to provide examples of women’s property rights after the program. Within the same time period, some men became more accepting of the idea that a woman has the right to own land, and a girl has the right to inherit property and land:

“(T)hrough being sensitized some men are beginning to change their attitudes… People were concerned about girls inheriting land with a view that that land would be lost to her husband’s family. However, with continued sensitization, this view is changing. Some men are even openly talking about making girls their heirs which was unheard of in the past.”
— Male paralegal

- Several female community members who attended sensitizations were more aware of their property rights by the program’s end. Most were aware of the importance of legalizing one’s marital union and how this is connected to upholding women's property rights as well as a woman’s right to own land.

Within Relationships/Partnerships
- Support from a range of leaders, including elected officials (e.g., LC1s, LC2s), religious leaders, and customary (clan) leadership, helped paralegals become more effective in addressing women’s property rights. This was particularly true when leaders provided paralegals with dedicated time and space to speak about women’s property rights at leader-run events.

- Persons of influence were most helpful bringing people together for sensitizations, which had been difficult for paralegals to do on their own. Persons of influence could easily encourage community members to attend sensitizations, in part because of the prominent positions they already held. Often, persons of influence gave paralegals time to talk about women’s property rights at events they organized — usually introducing the paralegal to participants — or they would announce the dates, times, and locations of future sensitizations on the paralegal’s behalf.

- Those persons of influence, who as LC1s and LC2s made a commitment to address property matters in these elected positions, have helped paralegals handle property rights’ disputes and cases in a more effective manner. Most persons of influence who are also LCs appreciated paralegals’ knowledge of the law, which added value to the leaders’ resolution of disputes, and cases.

“...(When the paralegal and I work together) we both give our views and the people see that we are impartial. It also helps to strengthen each other’s confidence.”
— Male leader, LC1 chairperson
Within Communities

Various actors, including members of the community, leaders, and persons of influence, linked positive changes in the community around women’s property rights to the paralegals’ work. These changes include fewer land-related conflicts and increased knowledge and awareness of women’s property rights and the law.

“They [paralegals] have helped in resolving conflicts in the community, the number of women cases being abused/ oppressed has come down and the mistreatment of children in homes has also reduced in this area.”

— Male person of influence, LC1 chairperson

Furthermore, fear that the act of will writing will lead to death has abated in these communities largely as a result of paralegals’ sensitization work. Many now view will writing as helpful in averting property disputes in the future and during the program period, some women in the community wrote their own wills for the first time.

“People used to fear making wills because they would associate it with death. However, it’s now changing. I teach them that making a will forestalls any future problems and a properly written will is unchallengeable.”

— Female paralegal

“Some women say their husbands’ own also belongs to them so why should the paralegals tell them about writing wills. However some women took the advice and made wills. When we went back to visit, some of them brought out copies of their wills to show us.”

— Female paralegal

Lessons Learned

Targeted sensitization messages seem to strengthen the effectiveness of community education efforts on women’s property rights.

Technical support for paralegals has been helpful at two levels: in formal, structured trainings on the law and women’s property rights, as well as in the form of ongoing, personalized assistance on how to handle property rights cases and deliver sensitization messages on women’s property rights.

Strengthening relationships with local leaders and institutions – whether with local councils, religious leaders, or legal and law enforcement bodies – is critical for successful implementation of a paralegals program that aims to strengthen women’s property rights.

This work was generously supported by an anonymous donor.