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Gendered effects of land access and ownership on food security in rural settings in South Africa

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South Africa is one of the many countries that experience critical challenges regarding land issues, with rural women in particular having limited access to and ownership of land. This paper argues that land inaccessibility for women contributes significantly to their deprivation of economic opportunities. Secondary data on women and land ownership were extracted from main sources such as peer-reviewed articles and government gazettes. In the execution of this study, a comprehensive literature review (CLR) was conducted to illuminate the topic under investigation. The three phases (the exploration phase, the interpretative phase, and the communicative phase) of the comprehensive literature review method were adopted. The result of the review suggests that the gendered nature of land distribution contributes to the phenomenon of food insecurity that faces numerous women and their households in rural areas. The customary law is a key institutional factor that poses challenges for rural women in acquiring equal access to land ownership compared to men. The study recommends that the South African government should formulate better land policies that provide equal access to and ownership of land for both men and women.

KEYWORDS

food security, food insecurity, land access, rural areas, women

1. Introduction

Rural women face a plethora of challenges in accessing and owning land. Despite a Constitution that promotes human and women's rights, rural women in South Africa face numerous forms of oppression. Globally, numerous rural women are the key role players in and custodians of food security at the household level. They fulfil the roles of food producers, consumers, and family food managers. However, it has been observed that rural women still face a plethora of challenges such as limited access to ownership of land, cultural and traditional stigmatisation, a lack of access to support networking and, most importantly, limited access to financial backing (Mulusew and Mingyong, 2023). In African countries, most women may be considered poor and food insecure because they are bound by traditions that disallow them from possessing any assets. They habitually have to mediate access to land and finances through males who are the heads of households and the leaders in communities. This patriarchal attitude, which is dominant in most African cultures, marginalises women's constitutional rights. Rural African women's right to own land is vicarious, as they can only gain this right through men such as fathers, husbands, uncles, and sons. Zooming in on KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), it is evident

that 29.67% (2.8 million hectares) of land in the province is governed by customary laws that give senior men the sole right to productive resources, which is a most prevalent practise in rural areas. Furthermore, this patriarchal attitude compels most African women to do all household tasks apart from tilling the land. They are unpaid and, consequently, marginalised and have limited influence in their households and communities.

In the South African context, it is well known that the persistent situation of land inequality amongst races and between genders has led to food insecurity at the household level. Sadly, little has been done to address this disconcerting observation (Masuku and Jili, 2017; OoNorasak et al., 2023). They lament the slow speed at which women have been given the support needed to ensure their growth in the agricultural sector. Therefore, this paper argues that gender inequality in accessing and controlling productive resources is a causative factor for food insecurity in rural areas. Although the South African democratic government has embarked on a number of equality-driven interventions to redress the injustices of a grossly skewed distribution of resources, access to ownership of land in rural settings remains elusive for the majority of women (Mwambene et al., 2021).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (2015) indicates that, globally, not even 2% of the land is owned by women, whilst they produce between 60–80% of the food in rural settings. A substantial body of evidence indicates that women run less than 25% of agricultural businesses in developing nations. Moreover, “women in the developing world are five times less likely than men to own land, and [if they do] their farms are often smaller and less fertile” (Doss et al., 2015; Mokati et al., 2022). In this context, Agarwal (2018) argues that uneven access to ownership of land in rural areas, which is mandated by patriarchal-oriented customary norms, has resulted in low agricultural production and ongoing food insecurity in many households on the African continent.

García (2013) and Singh et al. (2022) both cite the FAO, arguing that, if women had the same opportunities for access to productive resources (such as arable land, seeds, fertilisers, tools, and loans) as men, they would have been able to increase agriculture yields by 20–30%. Mutangadura (2004) and Fagbadebo and Faluyi (2022) also note with concern that South Africa is well recognised as one of the leading African states that promote democratic values and civil liberties but that, even here, access to ownership of land is still dominated by men.

The number of female farmers is increasing as agriculture becomes more feminised, but if this process is expedited, it would improve intra-household nutritional allocations because owning a property naturally increases a woman's bargaining power within the family and community (Agarwal, 2018).

Therefore, this article examines the current situation in rural areas in relation to the distribution of the right to women to use and control land. In essence, the article argues that women are the major custodians of food security in their households and that this position should be acknowledged and respected.

2. Methodology

To investigate whether or not equal access to land ownership is a driving force for improving food security in rural South Africa, the design of this study was guided by a detailed, systematic, and

comprehensive literature review (CLR) that focused on qualitative investigations. Three phases of CLR were adopted: (1) the exploration phase, which has 5 steps, (2) the interpretative phase, which has one step, and (3) the communicative phase, which also has one step (Williams, 2018). These phases are explained below:

2.1. Exploratory phase

2.1.1. Step 1: Exploring beliefs and topics

The search strategy was determined after identifying and establishing the research topic of interest. Search terms such as ‘gender and food security in South Africa’, ‘gender and food security’, ‘agricultural’, and ‘women in agriculture’ were used. The relevant results returned by the search were remarkable. Unfortunately, just a few articles on Google Scholar and Sabinet were ultimately manageable after performing additional screening of abstracts using the country's names to separate material that was not from South Africa.

2.1.2. Step 2: Initiating the search

In this step, sources of data were identified. Peer-reviewed articles in the English language published between 1994 and 2023 were identified by accessing two databases on the Internet (Sabinet and Google Scholar), and the results were analysed. The articles were screened using filters that considered the studies' location and context of land or food security. The initial search yielded 5,349 studies. After removing duplicates and deemed irrelevant studies, a rigorous review of 1705 research articles on women's role in land and food security was conducted. Upon further consideration of all the inclusion criteria (see section below), 67 studies were selected for analysis.

2.1.3. Step 3: Storing and organising information

Organising and storing the selected information was conducted in Google Forms, which is a technology-based strategy. A data extraction form was constructed to help extract information from each article on land, gender, and food security in rural settings in South Africa, as listed under the research objectives. The articles were divided according to the research methods the studies employed, namely qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Many conceptual papers addressed the topic significantly, but they were discarded as they did not report on research.

2.1.4. Step 4: Selecting and deselecting information

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were sampled for the review based on a sampling criterion that only allowed articles from sub-Saharan African countries. All the articles that were ultimately included in this comprehensive literature review were based on empirical research and conceptual papers. The legal case and legislative frameworks related to this study were also included to have an insight into political will to address gender inequality and land rights issues. Another criterion was the area of the study. The articles selected had to represent communities in rural settings that were poor, vulnerable, underdeveloped, or located in remote areas. The gender of the sampled population had to include

females, and the articles that were selected had to have been published after the advent of democracy in South Africa (1994 to 2023). The search went back that far as it intended to incorporate all relevant literature since 1994 on land access and food security. The search was done during 2022 and 2023. Table 1 provides details of the steps followed to identify articles for review.

Excluded articles were those that compared sub-Saharan countries with non-African countries. Articles published before 1994 were also not considered because the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 was pivotal in this investigation as it was deemed the custodian of human rights in terms of gender disparities, racial discrimination, cultural diversity, and property rights. Articles written in non-English, non-traditional sources such as visual media and non-scholarly observations were excluded.

Step 5: The search was expanded using MODES a process that contributed to the addition of media, observations, documents, expert opinions, and other secondary data. MODES was therefore used as a vehicle to take the traditional literature review to the next level (Onwuegbuzie and Frels, 2015). For this review, Google Scholar and Sabinet were the most suitable databases to locate scholarly peer-reviewed sources that had immense significance in terms of gender, land access, and ownership in relation to food security in outlying areas.

2.3. Interpretive phase

2.3.1. Step 6: Analysing and synthesising information

Papers published after South Africa's democratic dispensation were taken into consideration as Section 25 of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) asserts that all citizens, regardless of gender, race, and cultural diversity, should have equal access to land as one of their fundamental rights. As this was essentially a qualitative literature review, no specific comparator interventions or demographics were considered as the scope of the review was limited to certain criteria to achieve the objectives of the study. Therefore, a wide variety of study methodologies, including descriptive and exploratory/explanatory methods, were considered.

TABLE 1 Results of the preliminary literature search using databases.

Database	Total number of results	Peer-reviewed papers	Included for literature
SAGE journals	48	32	00
Google scholar	807	160	25
Social sciences citation index (Web of science)	300	157	00
EBSCOHost	458	200	00
Scopus	567	267	00
Sabinet	1,449	344	42
Web of science	652	252	00
Jstor	300	48	00
Springer link	768	245	00

Data were analysed using thematic analysis and the findings are presented under themed headings in this paper.

2.4. Communication phase

In the third and final part of the seven-step process, the researcher is required to deliver a presentation to an audience on the findings of the comprehensive literature review. Therefore, the information, analysis, conclusions, and implications of this study are communicated in writing in this journal paper, which is an approach supported by Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2015).

3. Access to land ownership by rural women to address food security

The primary objectives of the Constitution Republic of South Africa of 1996, the White Paper on South African Land Policy of 1997, and a succession of relevant legislations are to redress racial and gender disparities in land ownership, develop the agricultural sector, and improve the livelihoods of the poor (Walker, 2005; Bayer, 2022). Most tribal authorities in rural settings discourage women from acquiring land. Thus, many women are obliged to acquire land through their husbands or other male relatives, which is an arrangement that leaves them with limited secured rights compared to those of their male counterparts (Cheteni et al., 2019). Gender inequality that disadvantages women in their quest to own land has not been adequately addressed at either the conceptualisation or implementation level using gender-responsive evaluations. This paper thus argues that the key to alleviating women's food insecurity and other poverty-related issues lies with their right to access and own land, which is entrenched in the Constitution. If this right is unequivocally granted, it will foster women's empowerment and growing awareness of their role in food security development.

For women, owning land provides a means to alleviate the 'evil twins' of food insecurity and poverty as it allows them to generate income and improve their livelihoods at the household level. In KwaZulu-Natal, most of the land redistributed for group resettlement schemes and communal grazing is of low quality. The private purchase of land in rural areas, which generally excludes women, distributes more land of high quality than government-assisted purchases. It is generally maintained that such patches of land that have been transferred to disadvantaged owners account for less than 6% of the total area transacted (Lyne and Darroch, 2001; Ngcobo, 2021; Zantsi et al., 2021). Of this small percentage of registered persons with land rights, women are the least secure regarding access to land rights (Akinola, 2018). Furthermore, Bob et al. (2018) argue that this inequality is an age-old socially constructed relationship between women and men that have shaped the perceptions and attitudes of society in South Africa and other part of the world. This is an indicator that major gaps exist between the law and practise which led to limited potential for the growth and consolidation of women in agriculture.

Ironically, male politicians in developing countries acknowledge that women play a crucial role in food production and distribution but still turn a blind eye when women are denied access to land ownership in rural areas. This means that considerable attention should be directed at governments that have failed to address this highly

debated and politicised issue for decades. Efforts to address this issue should be driven by state policy, which is greatly not well addressed in South Africa. In the absence of secure tenure, women's efforts to produce food in rural areas face the risk of not producing enough to address the problem of food insecurity in rural households. The absence of free access to ownership of land by women threatens future production opportunities and decent wages that are necessary to support the livelihoods of all members of rural households.

4. The effects of land inaccessibility and denied land ownership on women

Barriers to land ownership debilitate rural and urban women because culture within their environments offers limited economic-related opportunities, this led to less than 5% of Black women in South Africa own land (Thaba-Nkadimene et al., 2019). Moreover, there an inability or disinclination, to address the widespread cultural and traditional values that continue to suppress women. Furthermore, because women are still not benefitting from land interventions, it confirms that land reform policies that redress land disparities amongst previously disadvantaged groups have failed (Mubecua and Nojijeza, 2019).

Whilst women are primarily responsible for ensuring that their families are food secure through agricultural reproduction despite limited access to land (Masuku and Jili, 2017) agricultural activities have become the primary source of income for rural populations to sustain their livelihoods. In contrast, individuals who are economically affluent, have purchasing power, and live a perceived high quality of life, are revered as their status is measured by their income (Casale and Posel, 2020; Fapohunda, 2022).

This is a great disadvantage as a lack of supportive agricultural associations prevents women from accessing the wider market to sell their produce. Barriers that impede women's ability to access and own land in rural areas.

Prevailing social behaviour in rural communities is also a barrier towards the realisation of women's right to access and own land. Bob (2008) and Guerny du and Topouzis (1997) emphasise the negative impact of societal attitudes amongst rural communities towards granting land ownership to women. Some studies have revealed that rural communities strongly share the sentiment that women must not be given the right to own land, despite the fact that they work on it every day. This conservative and gendered attitude towards land ownership has been documented in numerous studies, which again underlines the extent to which patriarchy is still prevalent in South African rural communities (Agarwal and Bina, 1994; Brottem and Ba, 2019; Khuzwayo et al., 2019; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019).

This means that the Communal Land Rights Act 11 of 2004 has failed to address the issue of unequal opportunity for men and women to own land in rural areas. The inability of the former Act to adequately address the issue of women empowerment in land ownership has impacted negatively on women in rural areas and their ability to reduce food insecurity in their households. Jankielsohn and Duvenhage (2017) indicate that it is quite overwhelming and disappointing that, irrespective of legislation, laws, and various measures in place concerning women's empowerment, little change has been observed. They argue that the same challenges that underpinned the need for land reform and new legislation that gave

effect to international instruments concerning human rights are still faced by women even today.

Wing and de Carvalho (1995), Bohler-Muller and Daniels (2009), and Scheidegger (2020) indicate that, due to rural communities' social systems and socialisation in general, rural women seem to remain ignorant of their constitutional rights, hence they continue to be victims of discrimination and oppression. Yngstrom (2002) supports this stance, indicating that rural women have been socialised into internalising their traditionally ascribed roles, therefore they fail to take their rights and opportunities into cognisance. However, this paper maintains that this socialisation, particularly in the South African context, cannot be viewed without incorporating the history of the country where colonialism and apartheid shaped how women were ideologically seen. In post-apartheid South Africa, it is a sad fact that women in rural societies are still often relegated to the kitchen and to the role of taking care of the man.

Derry (2015) argues that the social class of women in rural areas has also been seen as a barrier to land ownership. Furthermore, being a woman (especially an unmarried woman) in many societies does not guarantee empowerment or increased access to ownership of land. It is widely perceived that married or widowed women with children are better able to access land than their single counterparts (Kuusaana et al., 2013; Chigbu, 2019; Reddy, 2020). This is evident in most rural areas where single women occupy a lower social status than married or widowed women. Rural women are also confronted with unequal rights in family structures, as male children are seen as more deserving of land rights, and this customary view compounds the suffering of women. The issue of unequal rights in the family structure is a societal issue that has given rise to unequal access to productive resources such as land and capital, and it is also an issue of socialisation in a society where patriarchy is perpetuated. However, because little attention has been paid to gendered discrimination in terms of land rights in South Africa, some women continue to fight for equal rights in the context of land ownership, but they often lack the needed support.

It has also been argued that rural women lack knowledge about land reform processes and that this directly prevents them from owning land or being familiar with the processes that must be followed to acquire land. For instance, Moagi (2008) asserts that the failure of rural women to acquire vital knowledge about land reform processes and procedures often leaves them vulnerable and at the mercy of their male counterparts or the leadership structures within their communities?. In this regard, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) hold the view that traditional leaders' perception of women's roles in their households, communities, and societies harms their ability to access ownership of land, their development, and their ability to sustain the livelihoods of their families.

5. The effects of customary law on gender equality

Mokgope (2000) holds the view that cultural beliefs and norms and culturally established social institutions prevent women from achieving emancipation. Furthermore, rural areas are characterised by age-old customary and social practises which, in most cases, serve as a stumbling block to women's empowerment and the realisation of their right to own land. The Constitution guarantees many critical rights for women such as the right to equality, freedom, education,

property, and access to clean water, housing, health services, sufficient food, and social security (Francis and Webster, 2019). What is lamentable is that, despite the provisions in the Constitution, customary laws in rural areas still relegate women to a position of servitude to men, a relationship in which they are not entitled to inherit the land. Furthermore, Blom (2006) and Moyo (2013) highlight that it is disconcerting that, irrespective of laws and legislations that underscore equal rights and opportunities, customs and patriarchal structures still dictate norms and socially acceptable standards of living in rural areas. Traditional leaders are in charge of land distribution in rural areas, and they overlook the supreme law in favour of their traditions, customs, and patriarchal advantage. This is particularly evident in KwaZulu-Natal province where the Ingonyama Trust discriminates against women and violates the Constitution in favour of the traditional authority it advocates. The Trust has jurisdiction over millions of people living in rural areas (Rural women take the Ingonyama Trust to court, 2020), and it has been alleged that this Trust, which manages tribal land in KwaZulu-Natal, discriminates against women and denies them the right to land tenure (Shoba, 2021). Women thus experience prejudice in many forms and from many sources, including traditional leaders who collaborate with the Ingonyama Trust administration.

Ngomane (2016) notes with great concern that, as a result of customary and statutory legal systems, women have fewer benefits and greater burdens than men. Kehler (2001) shares the view that South African women in rural areas are constantly subjected to a lack of access to resources and basic services, arguing that this has led to women in rural areas learning to develop coping mechanisms to sustain their livelihoods by subjecting themselves to customary laws even though they are treated as minors. This is clearly in conflict with the Constitution, which is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world based on its emphasis on human, social, and economic rights. Gender equality is articulated in Chapter 1 Section 9(187), which is the pillar of any policy directive that government adopts regarding gender issues (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2019).

In Rahube (2018), the Constitutional Court had to decide whether a provision in the Upgrading of Land Tenure Rights Act No. 112 of 1991 was constitutionally invalid in that it automatically converted holders of land tenure rights into owners of property without allowing occupants and affected parties an opportunity to make submissions (Smith, 2008). Although this case concerned the invalidation of certain provisions of this legislation, it highlighted how the law had historically deprived women of ownership rights to property. As the court noted, “an African woman suffers three-fold discrimination based on her race, her class, and her gender” (Rahube, 2018). Although the situation has not been too dissimilar under customary law, some court decisions have made changes to the legal regime. Under customary law, land was historically allocated by the traditional authority to the head of a household who was, in all likelihood, a man such as a woman’s father or her husband (Bekker et al., 2006).

The understanding of ‘head of a household’ also resonated in earlier legislation. Proclamation R293, which was promulgated in terms of the Black Administration Act No. 38 of 1927 (Parliament of South Africa, 1927) defined the head of the household in specifically gendered terms. As acting justice Goliath pointed out in the Rahube judgement, sections 8(1) and 9(1) of the Act envisaged “a situation where only men could be the head of the family, with women relatives and unmarried sons falling under their control.” This left African

women under customary law and colonial and apartheid legislation in a position where they could not legally be the owners of or exercise control over land. Although the aforementioned argument was generally accepted, Nhlapo (1995) argues that the development of customary laws under the Colonial and apartheid systems “usually took the form of an alliance between the colonial authorities and African males. This led to colonial and apartheid authorities and African males are holders of ‘strategic’ resources in the form of land, cattle, women, and children (and they) defended their vested interests by promoting the growth of rigid rules in place of custom when the latter system could no longer protect them from the effects of change.” Customary laws have not only continued to prohibit the active participation of women in economic activities, but they have also prevented them from gaining ownership right to land and other resources. This paper argues that, although laws differ from county to county in respect of the extent of women’s rights, a common feature is that most of these laws tend to view women as perpetual minors, and they thus fail to give them access to productive assets. Even if the Constitution does not discriminate against women, social norms, attitudes, and customary laws systematically marginalise women and prohibit them from having control over assets, particularly land. One practical example is inheritance laws that are patriarchal in nature as they give unequal succession rights to children on the basis of gender. This is based on the assumption that girls will eventually marry and have access to a husband’s land, or that she will take her family’s wealth to her husband’s family. It has been noted that some civil society organisations have been advocating and lobbying for women’s rights to be acknowledged in the Communal Land Rights Bill.

It is undeniable that the South African government, particularly the provincial government in KwaZulu-Natal, has made limited progress in allowing women to participate in decision-making structures. For instance, no woman has ever been appointed as a headman (Induna) or as a member of a traditional council regardless of the Constitutional Court handing down judgements that declared some customary laws and practises as invalid (Budlender et al., 2011; Khuzwayo et al., 2019).

6. Potential gains of improving land accessibility and ownership for rural women

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has consistently argued that improving women’s access to productive resources such as land will boost the agriculture sector (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). Justino et al. (2020), the latter organization argues that increasing access and ownership to land will ultimately result in rural women being in a position to provide more food for their households, and therefore rural families will reap the benefits of better health through access to nutritious meals and education.

Most people in rural areas are women and children who live under the poverty line. Bob (2008) therefore emphasises that, by extending ownership of land to rural women, they will be empowered to have increased control of their lives through enhanced food production and reduced food insecurity. Cross and Friedman (1997) emphasise that, compared to men, women value land as a source of food production to sustain the livelihood of

their households, whilst men may view it as a source of income for personal gain. This notion is informed by the fact that rural women contribute significantly to food production in South Africa and other African countries. Derry (2015) supports this notion, as he argues that granting rural women land ownership will increase their control of land through production mechanisms and enhance their effective and inclusive participation in decisions about land use. Authors such as Derry (2015), Akinola and Wissink (2019), Rehman et al. (2019), and Mwesigye et al. (2020) stress that secure access to and ownership of land has the potential to enhance intra-household bargaining power. By virtue of having ownership of land, rural women's status in households will be elevated, which also means that occurrences of domestic violence, conflict, and oppression will be minimised. This will, in turn, result in enhanced family relations as women will be afforded respect and recognition just like their husbands who own land. Galiè et al. (2019) suggest that the extension of ownership of land to women will result in increased confidence levels amongst rural women, ultimately empowering them in terms of their decision-making role in their families and households. 'An empowered woman is a powerful woman!' This saying suggest that women have the potential to become highly productive members of society who will contribute immensely to the economy. Derry and Diedong (2014) assert that increasing women's secure ownership of land will potentially improve the socio-economic status of rural households through the lessening of the burden on husbands who are the breadwinners. Two incomes are better than one; therefore, if women own productive land they will increase food security in their households and their communities which will be their markets.

In South Africa, the alleviation of rural food insecurity is a priority for the democratic government. With this being said, the government is not in a position to combat food insecurity on its own (Moyo, 2013), and it therefore needs to increase land ownership for women to ensure that they become active participants in the fight against all poverty-related issues. If land ownership for rural women is ensured and legally safeguarded, it will increase their productivity which will, in turn, lead to increased income generation and the creation of employment in rural areas. Such economic growth in rural areas has the potential to boost rural economic development. The importance of the role of women in the agricultural sector has been well documented and emphasised, and it is understood and acknowledged that rural households' access to food relies greatly on the work of rural women. Securing women's right to own land is therefore crucial in enhancing food security not only in rural areas but nationally as well.

7. Contribution to the field

Men and women are humans with different needs. The paper reveals that despite that South Africa is considered a democratic state, women in rural areas have suffered severe economic and social impacts from skewed access and ownership of land, which was determined through the country's patriarchal customary laws. The right to food security is meant to be enjoyed by all citizens including vulnerable groups such as women. However, the findings of this paper have exposed weaknesses of the government systems with reference

to women's economic deprivation and their vulnerability due to injustices in the land discourse. This has made food security far-fetched for poor women.

8. Conclusion

The discourse has affirmed that rural women in South Africa have been barred from gaining ownership of land through customary laws, traditional perceptions, and gender inequality in rural areas. Access to and ownership of land by women are essential as women are the most vital resource for food production in rural communities. Owning land is essential in enhancing women's ability to make a meaningful contribution to rural economies as they engage in activities such as crop and livestock farming which is their only livelihood strategy. However, the process of implementing equal ownership of land is hampered by a lack of government interventions, persistent adherence to customary laws, and the perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes in rural areas. Therefore, this paper urges that women's right to land ownership, particularly in rural areas, should not be restricted by gender identity or inequality. Land ownership is a crucial physical asset for rural women who are mandated by tradition to ensure food security in their households. Unfortunately, this is compromised in rural areas where unequal distribution of land ownership prevails regardless of some efforts to address this as demanded by the Constitution. In rural areas, men have traditionally been favoured by customary law as the owners of land, and this situation has not changed much. In fact, the prevalence of customs that deny women access to and ownership of land has resulted in low agricultural production and has perpetuated food insecurity in many households. The dependency syndrome that prevents women from owning land undoubtedly exacerbates existing gender inequality in affected areas. Moreover, the limited access that women have to land ownership means that they are systematically marginalised and therefore excluded from decision-making processes related to productive resources and assets. Free access to tribal land and ownership of the areas they cultivate are crucial if rural women are to realise their potential as food producers who have the ability to engage in agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Only if this is achieved will women independently generate income that will alleviate food insecurity and dependency on their male counterparts. Conversely, the subordinate position of rural women in society has a negative impact on rural development as their needs are not met whilst their vulnerability to food insecurity and other related poverty issues is perpetuated. This situation has led to a growing number of landless women in rural areas, which is a situation that increases household food insecurity.

The paper argues that, in the South African context, women are systematically excluded from being beneficiaries of land reform due to a customary law that limits them from enjoying land rights on an equal footing with their male counterparts. However, it also acknowledges that the marginalisation and exclusion of women concerning land ownership is not peculiar to South Africa because land ownership is skewed across the African continent where women's right to property is unequal to that of men. What is peculiar about the South African situation, however, is that this country has one of the most advanced democracy-based constitutions in the world, yet its rural women are locked behind the door of traditional male superiority. This means that, despite their pivotal role in agriculture and food production, rural women in South Africa continue to face

discrimination as they are still barred from land and ownership rights as land titles are passed on almost exclusively down the male line. Withholding the right to own land from women does not only threaten progress in terms of gender equality, but it jeopardises sustainable and collective development as well.

In the context of the above discourse, the authors argue that customary law should not be understood as an advocate for exclusiveness; rather, it should be utilised to underscore the importance of gendered differences without denying women their right to own land. It is therefore recommended that the South African government should create a land distribution/ownership system that not only prioritises women's social and economic needs, but that also recognises their ability and power to create a viable rural economy based on their agricultural endeavours. Land ownership policies should therefore be revisited to advocate and give credence to the needs and skills of both genders in order to enhance equal access to and ownership of land. The ongoing challenge of gender inequality should thus be addressed by gender-responsive policies to undo the current unfair distribution of land. This will require an open-minded government that should devise interventions to address current skewed and gendered land rights to enhance rural women's economic empowerment and inclusive development.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Conflict of interest

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