

“We have used the Customary Land Law to gain access to our family lands, but what’s next for us?”

Asked the women of Kasseh Village in Port Loko District.



Women of Kasseh

"Gender Equality" is one of the most acclaimed parts of the 2022 Customary Land Rights and Land Commission Acts. The new legislation strengthens women's rights to own, access, utilize, and inherit customary land. This has addressed a long-standing issue of women not having access to land and not being engaged when land discussions with investors are conducted.

The women of Kasseh, in the Burreh Kasseh Maconteh Chiefdom, Port Loko District-northwest Region of Sierra Leone, participated in consultation meetings conducted in the Port Loko District before the land laws were adopted by Parliament. In fact, during a parliament discussion on the bill in July of last year,

some of these women walked into parliament to solicit MPs' support for the bill's seamless enactment into law.

Born in a place where males had complete control over all aspects of women's activities and traditions, the passage of the Customary Land Rights Act in September 2022 came as a surprise to several of these men. It was a widely held belief that women should not sit with males to discuss questions of land distribution and inheritance because they believe that **"a hen should not crow where there are cocks."** For hundreds of years, such a deep belief has allowed women to accept choices and decisions made on their behalf by men.



Following the passage of the Customary Land Rights and National Commission Acts in 2022, Land for Life made promoting knowledge of the laws one of its five-year strategic targets. The organization through its partner, UPHR has had a major influence in all of the communities in Port Loko District. In Kasseh, for example, the women have formed small groups to study more about the law's provisions page by page. **"We thank Land for Life-SL for the weekly engagement on the laws,"** one of them stated. Despite the fact that the majority of these women cannot read or write, their eagerness to learn about the law is palpable. **"We can't read, but our understanding of Customary Law can't be underrated." Said Madam Sampa Kamara.**

With such legal understanding, particularly regarding women's rights to inherit family lands, many of these women have asked the heads of their families and chiefs to give them their own piece of their family land. It may interest you to know that the majority of these women have been successful in inheriting family lands. **"My family land has now been surveyed, and I have the documents,"** Isatu Sesay stated. **"With this document, I can grow my own crops or negotiate with an investor."** They say that knowledge is power, and these women have utilised their knowledge to obtain what is rightly theirs.

During the engagement's question and answer period, several of the women raised their hands and said, "We have used Customary Land Law to gain access

to our family lands, but what's next for us?" For these women, knowing customary law would not help them secure the lands they currently hold. "If we don't do anything on those lands, our family members will come and take them from us one day." One of the women stated. Even though most of them are now growing vegetables on some of their property, they fear that because it is a seasonal crop, their land is not secure. Due to their low financial resources, these ladies are unable to survey their property and are asking for assistance to plant permanent crops such as cashew, mango, and other economic crops such as rice, onion, and others that would contribute to the country's food self-sufficiency.



The engagement concluded with a plan for women to establish a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA). According to them, this program will help them acquire tools, seeds, and seedlings to further their eco-farming aspirations. Similarly, they are also calling on men to support them achieve their vision.

