

Case Study of a Community-based Legal Aid in Mbale District

Grace (aged 40) was born in Bunguko subcounty in rural Eastern Uganda and moved to Mbale in search of employment. She completed secondary school and earned a certificate in human trafficking and peer education. Currently, she is working as a police officer, but she also raises poultry and grows crops both for home consumption and for sale, in order to supplement her household's income. She is married and lives with her four children who are all between the ages of 10 and 19.

Grace started working as a volunteer Community-based Legal Aid (CBLA) for Uganda Land Alliance (ULA) in 2008 when she realized community members were oppressed and ignorant of the law. In her role as a police officer, she had witnessed other officers taking advantage of community members' poor legal knowledge. She felt that gaining training as a CBLA would enable her to speak from an informed viewpoint on legal matters and help to restore her community's faith in the formal legal system.

Grace's position as a police officer facilitates her legal aid activities and allows her to use her influence to educate the community and her colleagues about elements of the law. Grace notes that the majority of cases she covers are domestic disputes. In some instances, land or property is involved in the family dispute, but in other cases the grievances might concern issues of domestic abuse, lack of financial support for children, and adultery. Grace is very active in providing trainings to the community. In some cases she talks to women's groups about marriage, divorce, and ownership rights. She has also trained staff at local non-Governmental Organizations on the different land tenure systems, as well as trained a field force police unit on inheritance law.



The woman in the center of this photo had given her father money to purchase land on her behalf nearly 20 years ago, but now her father is claiming the land as his own and planning to sell the land for his own profit. The woman brought the case to Grace, who gathered this group of local leaders and other family members together to hear the case and mediate a resolution.

“Today, you as a woman must ensure that you go together [with your husband] when you are going to buy land. And that both your names appear on the sale agreement.” – Grace

In one case Grace became aware that other police officers were mistreating suspects being held in prison until their trial. She addressed this issue by educating her colleagues on the rights of the suspects. She told them that the inmates have rights as humans and that they should not be tortured or denied food.

Grace faces many challenges in her work as a CBLA. She finds that some men view her work as a threat to their power since they believe women have no property rights. She believes that the CBLAs need more capacity building on issues related to land property rights and issues of domestic violence. Grace also thinks improvements can be made to the legal aid services by providing CBLAs with transportation allowances so that they can reach more remote areas.



This case study was conducted as part of the qualitative research for the project “Evaluation of Community-based Legal Aid Activities in Uganda and Tanzania” which took place from December 2011 to June 2012 to assess the potential of CBLA activities to strengthen women’s land rights via improvements in men and women’s knowledge, attitudes, and practices on gender and land issues. As part of this research, 10 CBLAs were given voice recorders and cameras to journal their interactions with community members, and narrate their day to day challenges in their work over a three month period. In the Mbale district, ULA currently supports 8 to 10 Women’s Rights Advocates, including Grace as CBLAs in six subcounties. ULA also supports a separate CBLA program in Mbale, “Mbale paralegals” who work in 14 subcounties (one to two CBLAs per subcounty) separately but in coordination with the Women’s Rights Advocates.

Disclaimer: This note has been prepared as an output for the “Evaluation of Community-based Legal Aid Activities in Uganda and Tanzania: Strengthening Women’s Legal Knowledge and Land Rights” project and has not been peer reviewed. Any opinions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or opinions of IFPRI. We are thankful to field partners including ARUL and ULA in Uganda, and Niras, WLAC and TAWLA in Tanzania. This project was made possible through generous funding from an anonymous donor.

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