



An empowerment meeting for women and youth in Kenya's Nyamira County. PHOTO CREDIT: ZABLON OYUGI

# How collective action is helping women, youth in Kisii beat land scarcity

By Zablun Oyugi

When Kenya passed its 2010 Constitution, it was seen as a major victory for gender equality, especially in terms of land ownership and control. The hope was that women and youth—groups historically sidelined in land matters—would finally gain more secure access to land for farming and other economic activities. But more than a decade later, that hope remains largely unfulfilled in many parts of the country.

According to a joint report by Hakijamii, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), and the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR), customary laws and patriarchal practices continue to block women—and, to a lesser extent, youth—from inheriting or owning land.

This has stifled economic progress for many, particularly in the agriculture-dependent Kisii region where land sizes are shrinking due to population pressure and fragmentation.

Yet, amid these challenges, women and youth groups are rewriting their story—not by waiting for cultural shifts or policy enforcement, but by pooling resources, adopting innovation, and standing together.

## Table banking and collective leasing

Faith Onsinyo, a member of Imara Daima Community-Based Organization (CBO), knows firsthand the limitations that land ownership inequalities place on women. Most of the women in her group are involved in small-scale farming, poultry keeping, and mushroom production. But lack of

access to land has restricted their ability to scale up.

“The dream of expanding our farming activities is constantly being challenged by our lack of land rights,” she says. “Even when we use land offered by our husbands or relatives, we risk losing control of the income generated.”

To address this, Onsinyo and her peers have turned to table banking, a group savings and lending model where members contribute funds regularly and access loans without needing land title deeds as collateral.

“With table banking, as long as you’re an active member and have a good saving record, you can get a loan to lease a small plot of land,” she says. This has allowed women to access temporary plots for farming, free from the fear







*A skills demonstration activity for women and youth in Kenya's Nyamira County. PHOTO CREDIT: ZABLON OYUGI*

of having their produce—or income—taken away.

### **Innovating around scarcity**

Beyond leasing, women and youth in Kisii are embracing innovative farming techniques that make the most of limited space. One such method is vertical gardening, a soil-less system that enables high-density cultivation of vegetables and herbs in small spaces like kitchen gardens or courtyards.

Damarice Kwamboka, a youth mobiliser with international nonprofit Practical Aid, says vertical gardens are a game changer.

“They can produce 50 to 100 times more yield per square foot compared to traditional farming,” she notes.

Kwamboka, who grows coloured capsicum in an 8x24-foot greenhouse, says modern methods such as vertical gardening, greenhouse farming, and mushroom cultivation have empowered young people, especially those without family land, to start and sustain agribusinesses.

Ventures gaining popularity among youth and women include beekeeping, black soldier fly rearing, and azolla farming—enterprises that require minimal space but offer promising returns.

### **Pooling energy**

Like many others in Kisii, Hesbon Onchong’a depends on a small family plot he shares with his parents. With less than half an acre at his disposal, he was forced to look for alternatives.

For the past two years, he has been farming azolla, a nutrient-rich aquatic plant used as livestock feed, selling it to farmers at Ksh1,000 per kilogramme and earning about Ksh10,000 monthly.

“Leasing land costs about Ksh5,000 per year for a 50x100-foot plot, and that can be difficult for many rural youth without steady income,” Onchong’a says. “So we save in groups, borrow collectively, and support each other.”

He is also a member of several youth and farmer groups that facilitate access to knowledge, technical support, and even farm inputs. “The networks we’ve built help with marketing our products, accessing financiers, and training. Alone, it would be impossible.”

### **Safe havens for the marginalised**

Women in Kisii face additional barriers when they are divorced, separated, or single mothers. According to Patrice Milton, a leader in Kilimo Bora CBO, such women are often treated as societal outcasts, denied access to family land, and left without alternatives.

“These women have no chance of inheritance or even borrowing land from relatives. If they can’t buy land, they’re simply locked out,” he says.

Kilimo Bora has become a safe haven for such women. Through savings groups and small grants, the CBO supports income-generating activities like indigenous vegetable farming, chicken rearing, and fish farming. These ventures help women meet essential needs such as food and school fees for

their children.

“Land is not just about farming—it’s about power and agency,” says Milton. “When a woman owns or controls land, she can use it as collateral, decide how it’s used, and secure her family’s future.”

### **A region under pressure**

Kisii’s land crisis isn’t just a gender issue. The region is densely populated, with average farm sizes ranging from 0.5 to 4.5 acres, often fragmented through generations. This pressure has discouraged many young people, who see no room—literally or financially—to grow.

“Many youth are giving up and moving to urban areas,” Milton adds. “They have the energy but no land, no tools, and few incentives to stay.”

But for those who choose to remain, groups like Kilimo Bora, Imara Daima, and Practical Aid-supported networks are offering not just solutions—but hope.

While land rights remain an uphill battle for women and youth in Kisii, collective action is proving to be a powerful equaliser. From table banking to vertical gardens, and from leasing cooperatives to group farming initiatives, these communities are demonstrating that when people come together, scarcity can breed innovation—not defeat.

As Kenya continues to grapple with land reforms, the quiet revolution in Kisii offers a blueprint: when rights are delayed, resilience takes root ■