

# Empowering Women in Lesotho: Actions toward Gender Equality

Maleribe Leleka lives in Pitseng, a village in northern Lesotho. In 1985, she married under customary law and moved in with her husband and his mother. A year later, Maleribe's husband was unable to secure a job and support Maleribe and their two children. In response, her mother-in-law sent Maleribe and her children away. Returning to her parents' home, Maleribe looked for a job relentlessly but was unable to find opportunities in her village or in the nearby vicinity. In 2001, Maleribe secured a job as a cleaner at the local community council in Pitseng, and she started saving her money to buy a piece of land.

By 2003, she had saved enough money—but when she went to the village chief, he would not allow the property purchase to go forward. As a married woman, Maleribe had no decision-making power. She needed her husband's permission and signature on formal financial transactions, even though she did not live with him and he had not supported the family in many years.

In 2009, Maleribe attended a community council meeting where MCA Lesotho (the local entity managing implementation of Lesotho's MCC Compact) was conducting training on the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act. Maleribe learned that under the new law, she and other Basotho women no longer needed their husbands' permission to apply for a loan, get medical insurance, or purchase property. Maleribe immediately went to her village chief to purchase



*Maleribe Leleka is proud to be a property owner and grateful that, because of the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act of 2006, she can apply for a loan without her husband's consent. Encouraged by MCC to remove legal barriers that kept married women legally categorized as "children," the Government of Lesotho passed the law as part of its efforts to promote gender equality.*

land. In accordance with the new law, the village chief approved the purchase and Maleribe now owns property in her name. She immediately began purchasing rocks, cement, and windowpanes to build a stable, safe house on her new property.

Thanks to the training received through the Gender Equality Project, funded by the MCC Compact, Maleribe—and thousands of other women in Lesotho—are now aware of the rights and services they can access without a husband's



permission. The Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act repealed old laws that made married women in Lesotho second-class citizens. Prior to 2006, women like Maleribe held the legal status of minors, limiting their economic, financial, and social rights. This type of inequality has direct negative impacts on national development, particularly at the rural household level.

The Gender Equality Project was initiated after an extensive gender inequality assessment conducted after Lesotho became eligible to apply for MCC grant assistance. The study focused on the implications of gender inequalities for economic growth and poverty reduction. Without ensuring gender equality in economic rights, MCC Compacts face a significant barrier to succeeding in reducing poverty through sustainable economic growth.

The Gender Equality Project under the Lesotho Compact is training and educating both women and men about the new law. This training aims to ensure equal access to economic resources and to expand opportunities for meaningful participation in the economy by all segments of Lesotho's society, including training key institutions and sensitizing relevant authorities and stakeholders to develop knowledge, awareness, and practices that support gender equality in economic rights. This is an important step for women and men to gain equal access to economic resources and opportunities as they chart a course toward increased prosperity.

Maleribe needs approximately U.S. \$550 to finish constructing her house; she is planning to apply for a bank loan to cover the costs. Her children are very proud, and Maleribe is happy to be independent and to have control over her economic future.