



# TURNING THE TIDE

THE GENDER FACTOR IN ACHIEVING LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY







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MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN  
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Poor rural women in developing countries are critical to the survival of their families. Fertile land is their lifeline. But the number of people negatively affected by land degradation is growing rapidly. Crop failures, water scarcity and the migration of traditional crops are damaging rural livelihoods. Action to halt the loss of more fertile land must focus on households. At this level, land use is based on the roles assigned to men and women. This is where the tide can begin to turn.

In the last five years, 52 countries have improved women's access to decision-making, local governance and resources. They have; strengthened the control and ownership of land, boosted access to financial, extension and market services and the use of new technologies. Women still lag well behind men in each of these areas but where these efforts have been taken seriously, for example, in India, Morocco, Senegal and Uganda, the results are phenomenal.

As we embark on a new strategy for 2018-2030, we must build on these lessons with a focused, systematic and practical approach that addresses land resources. We must build on the global consensus around the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly on Gender and on Land Degradation Neutrality to turn dreams into reality for poor rural women. Every woman and every family can have a fighting chance for a decent life.



Monique Barbut  
UNCCD Executive Secretary

## GENDER ROLES: MALE AND FEMALE FACES OF LAND USE AND MANAGEMENT

In most developing country regions of the world, you can predict with a high degree of accuracy which land is owned or cultivated by a man or a woman. Land is the asset people rely on for livelihoods in the rural areas. And it is shared and allocated on the basis of the needs and roles that men and women are given in their communities. These roles dictate the kinds of crops and livestock men and women tend, the rights one has to the land and its products and the size and quality of the plot of land men or women are allocated. In turn, these realities define the resources men and women can access, the technologies they use and the assistance they get from the government.

Often, women's primary duty is to take care of the children, the sick and the elderly. They grow food, collect water and fuel, and look after the small livestock and plants with medicinal value, making agriculture the most important occupation for rural women in many developing countries.<sup>1</sup>

As the primary household food producers, women also play critical roles in livestock rearing and they grow subsistence crops, mostly the staple and traditional foods consumed daily. Women land users, especially farmers, hold small-scale and family farms.<sup>2</sup> They keep and own the smaller animals, such as goats, sheep, pigs and backyard poultry that are kept near the house. They are often responsible for milking ewes, processing and selling milk products, providing feed/fodder and water, caring for newborn lambs/kids and sick animals. Young girls are involved in the grazing of goats and sheep.<sup>3</sup>

Men on the other hand, tend to grow cash crops and keep larger livestock, primarily for trade. When the rearing of small animals becomes a more important source of family income, the ownership, management and control of these animals often turns over to the man.<sup>4</sup> Men are more likely to own medium-sized or large-scale commercial farms placing them in a better position to capitalize on the expansion of agricultural tradable goods.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, helps them to attract government extension services.

Women tend to sell in local markets where they find demand for traditional varieties of crops. Men tend to sell uniform and exotic varieties in export markets.<sup>6</sup> In West Africa, for example, cassava was largely seen as a 'woman's crop' because women produced, processed and transported it to the mill. But in Ghana, at one point, men





started taking over some of these roles, and owned twice as many food-processing machines as women.<sup>7</sup> This is not an uncommon fate, although it can be avoided or minimized through policy.

Available data from sub-Saharan Africa on how land is shared, managed and owned, shows women hold smaller and less valuable plots of land than men, on average, regardless of the wide variations both across and within countries.<sup>8</sup>

- Women make up 43% percent of the agricultural labor force worldwide, with wide regional variations<sup>9</sup>
- Women make up 21% of population in agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean, 43% in Asia (outside of Japan) and 49% in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>10</sup>
- More than 95% of all economically active women in Burundi, Rwanda, Niger and Nepal work in agriculture
- Female farmers receive only 5% of all agricultural extension services
- Only 15% of agricultural extension officers are women
- In many countries women are only half as likely as men to use fertilizers<sup>11</sup>
- On average, men in Nigeria own 99 times the land area women own<sup>12</sup>
- 24% and 48% is the share and/or value of land held by women in Ghana and Uganda respectively<sup>13</sup>
- Women in Brazil make up 57% of the population, but own 11% of the land<sup>14</sup>
- In Nepal, women control just 8% of the agricultural land<sup>15</sup> and only about 20% of the households in the country have women who own land and property<sup>16</sup>
- Less than 1% of the land in Mozambique is jointly owned and managed by men and women<sup>17</sup>



## GENDER ROLES MEET LAND DEGRADATION



Poor land uses, natural hazards and worsening climatic effects are turning more and more productive areas into barren lands, and placing the livelihoods of more people in jeopardy. One study had projected that by the year 2025, about 1.8 billion people, a majority of them women and children, would be negatively affected by land degradation. But that number has been surpassed. Already, more than 2.9 billion people are affected by land degradation.<sup>18</sup>

Land degradation can lead to food shortages, hunger and malnutrition, conflicts over natural resources or distressed migration. These effects have broader social and political repercussions right up to the global level. Some impacts, such as malnutrition, produce long-term effects like stunted growth that are difficult to reverse and affect girls much more.

- 40% of land degradation is found in areas of high poverty<sup>19</sup>
- More than 2.7 billion people or 90% of the 3.4 billion people living in rural areas are in developing countries<sup>20</sup>
- Malnutrition can cost nations 2-3% of gross domestic product (GDP). It can cost individuals as much as 10% of their lifetime earnings<sup>21</sup>
- Twice as many women suffer from malnutrition as men, and girls are twice as likely to die from malnutrition as boys<sup>22</sup>
- The number of hungry people would reduce by 12-17% if gender gaps in agriculture were closed<sup>23</sup>

### Land Rights the Driver of Land Degradation

The right men or women have to – use, access, control, own or sell – land is important. Having or lacking these rights can mean all the difference in avoiding or reducing land degradation because land is the asset most commonly used to borrow against investment. Owning a title is critical.

Both men and women rarely have the right to sell inherited land or to use it as collateral,<sup>24</sup> but men still possess stronger land rights than women in just about every region of the world<sup>25</sup> Moreover, lack of credit to register land also inhibits women's access to land.<sup>26</sup> In Ghana, for example, insecure rights to land have resulted in women making farming decisions with negative effects on land productivity.<sup>27</sup>

- 15% of women globally have the right to manage their land, this figure declines to 5% in the Middle East<sup>28</sup>
- In sub-Saharan Africa where female and male farmers are roughly equal in number, women farmers receive 10% of the loans granted to smallholders and less than 1% of the total credit advanced to the agriculture sector<sup>29</sup>





### Climate Change, A New Burden

Natural hazards and climatic variations worsen the threats rural land users in developing countries, particularly women, face because in these countries agriculture depends almost entirely on rainfall. But most women don't use irrigation. In addition, the native and domesticated plants that many local communities depend on for food are being affected by climate change. Planting seasons are becoming less predictable due to severe droughts, frequently late or early rainfall arrivals and variable rainfall amounts. These challenges, when combined with their lower levels of education and limited use of irrigation technologies, expose women much more. They cannot cope.

Where families are pushed beyond endurance, men are taking extra-ordinary measures that boomerang right back on women. The common coping mechanism is for men to migrate to find jobs to supplement their household incomes, leaving women to take on men's land-related responsibilities. If conflict breaks out due to intense competition to secure resources, women are exposed to new risks that may include the loss of their land and physical violence. And when households and entire communities face severe water and food shortages, the health of women, girls and children is greatly compromised through malnutrition and poor sanitary conditions.





## A SOLUTIONS AGENDA WITH WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

The responsibility women (and sometimes girls) have of meeting the household's needs makes them more heavily reliant on natural resources than around

men, who are rarely responsible for these roles.<sup>30</sup> The global consensus the Sustainable Development Goals and the adoption of the UNCCD's new strategy for 2018-2030 are opportunities for policy makers to respond in a gender-responsive way. Now, more than ever before, women need adequate means to safeguard their lands from degradation. This is essential for the land degradation neutrality (SDG target 15:3) target to be achieved by, and remain sustainable beyond, the year 2030.

The innovations that have emerged at country and regional levels should be scaled up through policy action to help women to find the resources they need and to enhance their abilities. At a minimum, policies are needed in at least four key areas: 1) **participation**, 2) **land rights**, 3) **finance and credit** and 4) **knowledge dissemination**.





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## 1. Participation in local policy processes

The Convention mandates women's participation in policy design and implementation, especially at the local level. Parties to the Convention have endeavored to achieve this with mixed results. But some of the experiences show that a tipping point is reached when women's participation reaches 30%, whereas social transformation occurs when participation increases to 50%. They also show that there is a high cost of financial investment initially, but the returns in the long-term are even higher.

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In western Uganda, household food security was a recurrent challenge, but women have since turned the corner following the adoption of sustainable land management techniques. They are producing surplus food consistently and have recently sought government expertise on how to enter the food trade.<sup>31</sup> In Morocco, women's participation in a regional project designed to restore degrading oases motivated them to participate in local governance. It had immediate results. In the first year, 12 women won seats to represent three communities. The women are now involved in debates about the future and in local development projects. A Network of Elected Women Officials is in place to build women's capacities in local governance and decision-making.<sup>32</sup> In India, there was a 10% increase in livelihood opportunities; 2000 households reduced their dependence on fuelwood from forests; micro-watershed areas increased by 20-30% each with 5 to 10 alternative technologies for enhancing water availability for agriculture; non-farm livelihood options increased by at least 10%, and up to 20% for the households that entered the market for pine briquettes to replace fuelwood; and communities have cultivated at least 5 medicinal and aromatic plants.<sup>33</sup>

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To support women's participation, policies are needed to:

- Ensure women's participation and interests are reflected in all land-related government programs and projects, including those aimed at achieving land degradation neutrality
- Identify and build the capacities of social mobilizers to motivate women's participation, mentor them in leadership and provide a range of information and advisory services on sustainable land management
- Provide incentives, including funding, to support consultation in large-scale pilot and path-breaking projects that aim for gender parity

## 2. Innovation for land rights

Rural and traditional communities want to survive and grow, not to shrivel and die. By creating innovative approaches that are modelled on existing good practices that work, governments can strengthen women's rights to own land and what they produce. These approaches can be tested in limited locations before they are enacted nationally.



In Ethiopia, devolving the allocation of titles to local governments through certificates<sup>34</sup> has encouraged women to apply for and own land.<sup>35</sup> In Namibia, the Act on Customary Land Rights requires the bodies with the authority to approve titles to appoint four women with expertise on land as part of the decision-makers.<sup>36</sup> The officials proactively seek women to apply for land titles, accompany them through the application process and ensure their requests are addressed without discrimination.<sup>37</sup> In Mboula, a region of Senegal, the local government has allocated three women's groups about eight hectares of land per group to produce food. The women have organized themselves into groups that work in turns one day a week, and share all the produce. Their households have become food secure, they spend less time working on the land and they are now investigating the feasibility of oil production from a local tree that could boost their incomes.<sup>38</sup> The model has been adopted by some local governments in West Africa where mandates to issue titles exist.

Governments can strengthen the household food security of women, the poor and landless people by ensuring they have greater control over both their land and produce by setting policies that:

- Grant some authority to local governments to issue land titles to women
- Ensure national legislative acts include mechanisms to address the land needs of special groups, including women.
- Provide a limited-time use and ownership of land for multi-purpose gardens where women's groups can cultivate food to meet their household
- Allocate to women some of the land earmarked for restoration under the land degradation neutrality target, for the women to rehabilitate and own





### 3. Credit, loans and Value Chains

On average, only about 77% of the global financial services that are accessible to men are also accessible to woman.<sup>39</sup> Increasing women's access to resources, for instance, could raise agricultural output in developing countries by an estimated 2.5–4%.<sup>40</sup> Possessing a land title is vital, but additional actions are needed because owning a title is neither a guarantee nor the only means by which women can access credit and the other essential resources they need to improve land management. Women's groups have a high record of loan repayments, which could benefit them if only credit rating agencies and special funds to support women existed.<sup>41</sup>



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In Niger, near the town of Loga in Dosso region, the local government buys the tree seedlings for land rehabilitation from the local women. Women are using some of their land as tree nurseries.<sup>42</sup> To increase women's access to financial services by 15% annually, Nigeria's Central Bank has formulated a policy target and set up the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Fund for microcredit loans. 60% of the funds (roughly equal to \$810 million United States dollars) disbursed by partner financial institutions are reserved for women entrepreneurs. Mexico has amended its law to provide for equality between men and women when accessing goods and services.<sup>43</sup>

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Policies are needed to:

- Enable women's groups to access credit from micro-enterprises, formal banking systems and other innovative sources, including relevant specially designated funds from national and international sources, such as migrant remittances and the Adaptation, Land Degradation Neutrality and Global Climate Funds
- Provide incentives for the private sector to source their raw materials from women or to train them in value addition
- Ensure women earn a substantial amount of the income earmarked for government-supported land rehabilitation and restoration under the land degradation neutrality target

#### 4. Knowledge, Extension and Technological Services

Rural women hold valuable traditional knowledge on land use due to their historical dependence on natural resources and traditional care roles. Women should benefit from the scientific advances that have grown out of this knowledge. When extension services were matched with diverse needs, for example, with the needs of men and women farmers, women's demand for services rose by 600 percent and men's by 400 percent.<sup>44</sup>

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In western Uganda, the government found that women respond better to female agricultural extension officers. They trained more women extension officers and now send out the extension officers as a male and female pair. When providing the service to women, the female extension officer becomes the lead trainer and vice-versa. Together with Makerere University, the government developed a soil-testing kit to help land users to identify the deficiencies in their soil, which has motivated women to invest in the appropriate inputs.

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Government policies should aim to:

- Build the capacities of women's movements and organizations at national and regional levels, including through exchange programmes, to enable them to acquire the land-management services and skills they need
- Increase the number of women in the extension service system to support women land users to get relevant knowledge and skills in land management
- Build the capacities of women in new crop and sustainable land management techniques that can protect their lands from degrading
- Ensure every initiative undertaken in pursuing land degradation neutrality helps women to access knowledge, extension and technological services







If women were treated equally to men the global GDP would add up to \$28 trillion United States dollars or 26% to the annual global GDP in 2025.<sup>45</sup> Closing the gender gap in agriculture alone would increase yields on women's farms by 20-30% and total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5-4%.<sup>46</sup> Closing the gender gaps in all areas related to land use, including fuel and water production could raise national outputs even further. Social norms<sup>47</sup> and, as a consequence, policy, pose the greatest barriers to the change women need to overcome land degradation, particularly in the most vulnerable regions. The lessons from the implementation of the Convention over the last two decades show that change can occur through innovation. To realize the objectives outlined above, the Convention will support Parties and other stakeholders to realize relevant and effective actions by promoting these policies, learning from each other, building their and women's capacities and developing strategic partnerships, particularly with the sister Rio Conventions on Biological Diversity and Climate Change. The future of a sustainable, land degradation neutral world grows brighter or dimmer depending on whether women are at the center or the margins of our actions.

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United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification  
UN Campus, Platz der Vereinten Nationen 1, 53113 Bonn, Germany  
Postal Address: PO Box 260129, 53153 Bonn, Germany  
Tel. +49 (0) 228 815 2800  
Fax: +49 (0) 228 815 2898/99  
E-mail: [secretariat@unccd.int](mailto:secretariat@unccd.int)  
Web-site: [www.unccd.int](http://www.unccd.int)



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