



Her Land. Her Rights.

Advancing gender equality to restore land and build resilience

“Solving gender inequalities is not just the right thing to do. If we ensure that women are fully able to use their abilities, knowledge, talents, and leadership potential, our societies are simply better off.” – Former President of Finland and UNCCD Land Ambassador, Tarja Halonen

This policy brief highlights the critical role of gender-responsive approaches to land tenure that empower women and accelerate the implementation of land restoration commitments that build community resilience. It examines how greater tenure security for women and girls can lead to a more equitable and sustainable land management. The brief builds upon the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and its Gender Action Plan adopted in 2017. It is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those on poverty reduction, gender equality, and protecting life on land.

Widespread and rapid land degradation threatens rural livelihoods, food production, water availability, and biodiversity conservation worldwide. For more than 3 billion people, land is core to their survival, well-being, and dignity – it is the principal asset of the rural poor¹. When land is degraded and productive land becomes scarce, women are uniquely and differentially impacted due to their substantial role in land-based activities, greater vulnerability to poverty, and typically weaker legal protections and social status². In areas affected by desertification and drought, increased competition for scarce productive resources makes women and girls extremely vulnerable to these slow onset hazards.

In many developing countries, agrifood systems are a more important source of income and livelihood for women than for men. One-third of women in the labour force are employed in agriculture and related supply chains³. Despite the economic importance of the land use sector and its contribution to family welfare, women’s roles tend to be marginalised, their working conditions comparatively poor, and their wages at 82 cents for every dollar earned by men⁴.

Women and girls are important environmental stewards yet are too often excluded from participation and leadership in the management and restoration of land resources. As a result, they lack access to training, extension services, credit, and markets, while facing significant social barriers to participation in development, planning, and policymaking processes. Countries with more women parliamentarians are more likely to ratify environmental treaties and set aside land for conservation; for non-elected officials, only 12 per cent of 881 national environment-related ministries across 193 countries were led by women⁵.

Despite women’s vital role in food production, they are less likely than men to own and control land. Men have greater ownership and more secure tenure than women who globally comprise less than 13 per cent of agricultural landholders. The percentage of men who have ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land is twice that of women in more than 40 per cent of the countries that have reported on women’s landownership⁶. Although most countries explicitly recognise women’s rights to own, manage, inherit, and use land as collateral on equal terms with men, in more than 100 countries, women are limited in claiming and protecting land assets because of customary, religious, or traditional laws and practices⁷.

If women had equal rights to land, it is estimated that agricultural production in the poorest regions would increase by up to 4 per cent and malnourishment would decline by 12–17 per cent⁸. Without control and secure access to land and natural resources, humanity is doing a great disservice to their communities and societies, resulting in greater inequality, decreased economic productivity, and increased food insecurity.

1. Secure tenure for a more equitable and sustainable world

Tenure security is essential to women's empowerment in their households and communities by increasing their contribution and access to the social, economic, and environmental benefits that result from sustainable land management and restoration.

In addition to a lack of equal land rights, inequalities in access to other productive resources, information, financial services, appropriate technology, and decision-making limit women's incentives and capacities to restore and sustainably manage soil, water, and biodiversity. Conversely, more inclusive and responsible land governance that improves tenure security for women and girls can activate and accelerate the transition from degradation to restoration.

Millions of women and girls are at the forefront of the fight against desertification, land degradation, and drought, and leading many conservation, adaptation, and restoration efforts around the world. There is also growing evidence that the benefits derived from gender equality in the control and access to land resources extend well beyond individual empowerment to providing much-needed security and stability in rural households and communities. Women's land rights and the perception of secure tenure can:

- increase the capacity of women to invest in land⁹, and encourage land stewardship and other measures that are critical to fight land degradation and cope with climate shocks¹⁰;
- empower women and girls through greater participation in household and community decision-making¹¹, thus improving the well-being of the whole family¹², including children's nutrition¹³ and education; and
- boost the ability of women and girls to act autonomously and have more control over their future and that of their children¹⁴.

In some contexts, there may be a positive correlation between secure land tenure and reduced exposure to domestic violence, in part due to increased incomes, economic independence, and transformed power dynamics within the household¹⁵. Gender-responsive approaches are critical to better understand how secure tenure can be enhanced even in the context of discriminatory social or customary norms.



Overcoming Barriers to Access in Nicaragua

NGOs partnering with local organizations have implemented a project focused on measures to increase women's control and access to land, finance, inputs, and other services to improve local livelihoods. This empowerment of women increased their self-esteem and community status but equally important highlighted other key enablers of success: the importance of working with men to overcome male chauvinism and engaging with rural organizations and extension services to increase the uptake of agroecological practices. As a result of the project's advocacy component, women's land rights are receiving more attention in national debates¹⁶.

Joint Titles for Married Couples in Rwanda

A new legal framework for land registration was introduced in Rwanda in 2006 to increase tenure security for women. The community-led process required at least 30 per cent of the representatives of all land committees to be women. Furthermore, both men and women had to be present during the registration process, ensuring joint titles to the land. Women's land rights are now protected in land transactions, as land transfer forms require the consent of both spouses. They are also able to use the land as collateral for loans from banks and microfinance institutions. As a result, registered owners were over two times more likely to invest in soil conservation measures than unregistered owners, with women-headed households 19 per cent more likely when compared to 10 per cent of men¹⁷.

2. Gender-responsive approaches to support land restoration

Putting inclusive land rights at the centre of efforts to combat desertification, land degradation, and drought will enable countries and communities to set the course for a healthier and more sustainable planet for people and nature.

Women's equal rights to land and property are grounded in core human rights instruments. The UNCCD Parties (196 countries and the European Union) have committed to legally recognise women's equal use and access to land and land tenure security, and the essential role they play in collectively managing land more sustainably and reducing biodiversity loss¹⁸. In fact, Parties to all three Rio conventions have committed to take an operational and forward-looking approach to becoming more gender responsive in the design and implementation of measures to achieve their respective goals and targets.

There is a broad range of legal and customary land tenure arrangements available to secure women's land rights. Land tenure systems determine who can use what resources, for how long, and under what conditions. Regardless of the arrangement, policy frameworks are needed to guarantee women equal rights as well as an institutional environment for them to fully realise these rights and have access to justice to enforce them without discrimination.

Changes in social norms which empower women and increase gender equality often stem from shifts in individual and collective beliefs. These can be achieved through education, training, and dialogue with customary leaders or broader efforts to integrate gender equality messaging into communications and awareness-raising strategies¹⁹. In some countries, shifting gender norms will require context-specific measures to eliminate discriminatory social, cultural, or religious beliefs and practices that diminish women's enjoyment of land rights.

In recent years, countries around the world have adopted and strengthened laws that support women's land rights, creating the foundation for innovative pathways to achieve gender equality²⁰. For example, Kenya and Benin each conducted a participatory mapping exercise in areas targeted for land restoration, with the aim of documenting tenure rights of forest adjacent communities²¹. The outcomes of this and other studies reveal that not prioritising tenure issues, particularly for vulnerable groups, in the implementation of policy mechanisms may undermine broader land governance and restoration objectives²².

Technical Guide on the integration of the VGGT and LDN

In 2022, the UNCCD and FAO produced a technical guide on the integration of the Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the context of National Food Security (VGGT) into Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) and other land restoration initiatives. The guide includes nine, action-oriented pathways that address the relationship between inclusive development, women's land rights, and sustainable use and management practices necessary for effective land restoration. By building on the expertise and experience of a broad range of partners, the guide provides practical solutions that can be tailored to diverse national and local contexts, with the aim to increase sustainable land and water management practices and, in turn, improve tenure security worldwide²³.



3. Recommendations to strengthen women's land rights

Supporting countries and communities to strengthen women's land rights and access to natural resources is a concrete step towards linking human rights to Land Degradation Neutrality targets and other land restoration projects and programmes.

A new focus on achieving Land Degradation Neutrality seeks to accelerate transformative efforts to avoid, reduce, and reverse land degradation through gender and socially equitable means²⁴. A whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is needed to advance gender equality and ensure that both women and men equally participate and benefit from sustainable land management and restoration initiatives. The following recommendations can help address the land tenure-restoration nexus in a gender-responsive manner.



Reduce or eliminate discrimination that inhibits women's meaningful participation in decision-making processes concerning land governance.

- Address and adjust social norms, legal frameworks, and customary practices so that they do not impede women's control and access to land or deny them rights to inherit, possess, or use land.
- Introduce and enforce policy and legislative frameworks that promote inclusion and the meaningful participation in land use governance, planning, and implementation processes at all levels.
- Make available the full range of land governance tools (e.g., maps and plans, guidelines, training modules, tenure instruments, land document databases, monitoring and evaluation protocols) to embed an integrated gender perspective in decision-making processes.

Support gender-responsive reforms of legal, justice, and administrative systems.

- Conduct gender assessments, social mapping exercises, and multi-stakeholder dialogues in relation to land tenure to better understand the context and inform strategies to reform existing legal and administrative systems and/or procedures.
- Ensure that women and girls are fully informed of their land rights and that they have the support to access justice and enforce these rights without discrimination, including through customary and formal dispute resolution mechanisms.

Engage men and women through awareness-raising campaigns to shift gender norms and strengthen women's land rights.

- Invest resources to raise awareness and literacy about women's land rights at local and national levels and empower both men and women with the knowledge and tools to access justice in customary arrangements and formal land administration systems.
- Employ culturally sensitive approaches, including through the use of local languages, that advocate for the increased representation of women in land boards or other bodies responsible for distributing or overseeing land rights, including state and traditional institutions.

Conduct gender assessments and close the gender data gap.

- Build the capacity to collect and analyse data – disaggregated by sex, age, and diversity characteristics – as well as gender statistics on the access to, use of, and control over land and natural resources to inform decision-making and land documentation processes.
- Make gender disaggregated data more accessible and actionable so as to inform stakeholders and decision-makers in a timely manner which allows them to prioritise cost-effective investments to strengthen women's land rights.

Ensure sustained financial and technical support for gender-responsive projects and programmes.

- Invest in training and capacity building to strengthen the legal, economic, technological, and financial literacy of women, and encourage public and private financial institutions to develop and promote gender-responsive financial products and services that facilitate women's access to loans and credit. For example, the Women's World Banking partnerships with financial institutions in Africa demonstrate the value of designing financial products around women's needs²⁵.
- Embed a gender component in multilateral and bilateral donor funding for land restoration projects and programmes, such as through earmarked training and technical assistance for women and girls on leadership and management roles, regenerative agriculture, and other nature-based solutions. For example, the Global Environment Facility's Policy on Gender Mainstreaming is fully aligned with the strong gender mandates of all Multilateral Environmental Agreements²⁶.
- Partner with national and multinational companies to develop gender-responsive investment and business practices that empower and benefit women in regenerative production practices and land-based value chains. For example, the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund is an impact investment fund which blends resources from the public, private, and philanthropic sectors to support sustainable land management and land restoration projects²⁷.

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UNCCD POLICY BRIEF

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Women's land rights are intrinsically linked to gender equality. They are key enablers of women's economic autonomy and decision-making and play a central role in rebalancing unequal power relations within households, communities, governments, and institutions. This positions women's land rights as a central issue for the achievement of many Sustainable Development Goals.

Breaking down barriers to women's rights to land is an imperative. This facilitates leadership opportunities, access to markets and finance, and technology-enabled solutions. When their rights are respected, women are quick to seize the opportunity to adapt, build, and strengthen their roles in regenerative land management that makes their families and communities more resilient.

Gender equality is a first step to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality and better cope with the impacts of drought and climate change. Women are instrumental in providing security and stability in rural communities with great potential to contribute to land restoration activities. This policy brief provides recommendations for governments and other stakeholders to ensure their obligations and commitments to gender equality are fulfilled.

The UNCCD's Gender Action Plan demonstrates the renewed commitment of countries to improve the quality of life on land for women by:

- ensuring women's full participation in decision-making and implementation efforts;
- boosting women's economic empowerment and eradicating poverty and malnutrition;
- strengthening women's land rights, including access to resources and services; and
- enhancing women's access to innovation, knowledge, and appropriate technologies.

The objective of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is to support countries and communities with the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions. With 197 Parties, the UNCCD unites decision makers, scientists, civil society and the private sector around a shared vision and framework for action to transform how land resources are used and managed to ensure healthy lives and sustainable livelihoods. It is critical that these efforts continue to promote gender equality and gender-responsive approaches to the control and access to land.



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