



GROUNDING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS:

Towards equity and climate justice

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This policy paper reveals the urgent need for transformative change to secure equitable land rights for women and marginalized communities. By presenting recommendations for a broad spectrum of stakeholders and analysing macroeconomic factors through a feminist lens, we aim to stimulate discourse and drive forward a more equitable, sustainable future for all.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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ACRONYMS

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

FPIC - Free, Prior and Informed Consent

GEF - Generation Equality Forum

GLTN - Global Land Tool Network

OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals

UN - United Nations

UNCCD - United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

UNDRIP - United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

VGGT - Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure

SUMMARY

This policy paper provides a critical examination of international commitments on women's land rights, evaluating progress and persistent challenges. It scrutinizes commitments made through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Generation Equality Forum (GEF) Action Coalitions, revealing a substantial disconnect between ambitions and implementation.

KEY FINDINGS

- Despite strong SDG and GEF commitments by governments to ensure equal land rights for all by 2030, tangible on-the-ground progress has been utterly inadequate so far. Land is where it all begins: without implementing women's land rights commitments the SDGs and GEF ambitions may never be realised. Women farmers comprise 43% of the agricultural workforce despite owning just 20% of land. This represents a colossal failure on the part of governments in achieving the SDG and GEF commitments and targets.
- Data analysis reveals widespread lack of land ownership and tenure security for women and men in most countries, which hinders monitoring of progress based on the commitments made. Of the 68 countries that reported on women's rights to land ownership and/or control in their legal frameworks by 2022, only about 31% had laws that considerably protect women's land rights. As land inequality rises, funding and data on women's land rights remain scarce – policymakers turn a blind eye to the knowledge gaps. Data for the relevant SDG indicator 15.3.1 ('Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area') has barely been updated since 2015, with most countries failing to report on it.
- Women's land rights defenders courageously combat these injustices, despite facing violence and threats in many nations. Even though there is widespread information about the injustices defenders face, these nations and companies are not held accountable. In 2021 alone, 358 human rights defenders were reported killed, with 60% of these individuals being land, environmental and Indigenous rights defenders.
- While the GEF Action Coalitions have put forth valuable principles of transformation, feminist leadership and intersectionality, these terms have become ineffective buzz words and are not realising women's land rights in practice. The principles call for land governance which respects the rights of women and puts them first and centre in every decision. The principle of intersectionality highlights the fact that women have different experiences and face different forms of discrimination, meaning that applying a decolonial feminist lens is vital.
- Progress on reversing land degradation under SDG 15 has also been insufficient. Up to 1.5 billion more hectares of land could be degraded by 2030, deepening hunger and marginalization. Women stripped of land face increased food insecurity, climate vulnerability, violence and loss of livelihoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The substantial gap between international commitments and on-the-ground implementation of women's land rights must urgently be bridged through gender-transformative, intersectional feminist policies and concrete action.
- All stakeholders must boldly confront patriarchal norms, enforce gender-equitable legal frameworks, amplify women's voices, appreciate the diversity of women's experiences, and shift away from exploitative neoliberal paradigms.
- A profound transformation is needed in land governance to centre ecological sustainability, gender justice and women's leadership.
- We must unite to create a world where women's land rights are unequivocally upheld, fostering an equitable and sustainable future for all. Decisive action is needed now to avoid the irreversible costs of inaction.

1 UNVEILING THE NARRATIVE: INTRODUCTION

In a world grappling with unprecedented challenges – from the climate crisis and pandemics to hunger and income inequality – the strain on land and resources has widened gender gaps. This leaves women and marginalized communities more vulnerable than ever. In response, a diverse array of stakeholders – governments, civil society organizations, academics, corporations – have committed to champion women's rights, notably land rights. This is part of the UN Decade of Action (2020–2030),¹ which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)² and the Generation Equality Forum (GEF).³

Yet there's a stark warning: the 2022 UN Women's gender snapshot indicates it could take centuries to achieve gender equality at the current rate.⁴ With the growing preference for land-based solutions to global issues – from large-scale agriculture for food production to land acquisitions for climate mitigation solutions and privatising communal or public land – women's land rights teeter on a precarious edge. The GEF was created in 2021 to accelerate the limited progress made in achieving women's rights using the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* of 1995.⁵

This policy paper sheds light on the commitments made by stakeholders within the SDGs and GEF framework, revealing the urgent need for transformative change to secure equitable land rights for women and marginalized communities. By presenting recommendations for a broad spectrum of stakeholders and analysing macroeconomic factors through a feminist lens, we aim to stimulate discourse and drive forward a more equitable, sustainable future for all.

2 NAVIGATING FEMINIST LAND RIGHTS TERRAIN: THE SDGS AND GEF IN FOCUS

Women holding secure land tenure rights are not only better positioned to exercise their fundamental human rights – such as access to food, health, housing, work, and education – but their secured rights also have far-reaching implications for broader societal benefits. Evidence shows that securing women's land rights boosts agricultural productivity, enhances global food security, and propels sustainable development.⁶

For instance, research indicates that women with land rights participate more robustly in agriculture. This enhances household food supplies and strengthens overall food security.⁷ Secure access to land also influences women's health outcomes. Studies point out that women with land rights can make independent, critical healthcare decisions, including those about reproductive health.⁸ Secure land tenure also safeguard women from arbitrary eviction, ensuring a stable living environment. Furthermore, land rights can also amplify women's decision-making power within their households and communities, particularly over land use. This empowerment facilitates their engagement in agriculture or entrepreneurial activities, thereby improving their working conditions.⁹

The 2023 Oxfam report on loss and damage to land finds that unequal land rights and lack of land tenure for women exacerbates their vulnerability to climate change impacts.¹⁰ For example, the report demonstrates that in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, women's lack of decision-making power or ownership of land prevented them from accessing government climate adaptation support or compensation for losses. Women farmers in Timor-Leste who had formal land ownership, however, were able to receive relocation support from the government after cyclone flooding and land loss.

Secure land rights also empower women to make decisions and investments that strengthen climate resilience. For instance, a study in India showed that when women have land rights, households tend to invest more in girls' education, promoting gender-equitable resource allocation.¹¹ Therefore, affirming women's rights to land can uplift the position of women, households and entire communities, serving as a robust shield against poverty and violence.¹²

Unfortunately, entrenched discriminatory systems that breed economic and social inequalities often undermine women's land rights, disconnecting them from their lands.¹³ Overcoming these barriers requires strong advocacy for equal land tenure rights for women – a practical and strategic approach to advancing gender equality. This strategy yields significant benefits not

only for women but also for their families, communities and the broader society.

Critical Area F ('Women and the economy') of the landmark 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* underscored the integral role of women's land rights in fostering gender equality and economic justice. It argued for the dismantling of legal and customary obstacles that hinder women's access to land and other resources – such as capital, credit, technology, and other means of production – as well as addressing wage disparities, as essential for propelling women's economic empowerment and the creation of a just, equitable society.¹⁴

Building on the momentum of the 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, the SDGs and GEF provide unique platforms to champion women's land rights as part of a broader discourse on economic and climate justice. The SDGs emerged as a vital component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. These 17 universal goals are a rallying cry for humanity, advocating the eradication of poverty, environmental protection, and improved living standards for all, without exception. SDGs 1 and 5, respectively, ensure men and women have equal rights to economic resources and call for reforms to give women ownership and control of land and other forms of property, inheritance, and natural resources.¹⁵ In endorsing the SDGs, global leaders acknowledged the pivotal role of secure land rights in realizing these ambitious objectives, reflected in numerous SDG targets and indicators. These include target 1.4 which aims to ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and marginalized, have ownership and control over land and target 5.a which aims to undertake reforms to give women equal access to economic resources including ownership and control over land.

In addition, while the importance of land rights is explicitly highlighted in Goals 2 (food security and sustainable agriculture) and 15 (ecosystem protection, desertification combat and land degradation reversal), it is crucial to understand the broader interconnections. Land rights intersect and interweave with many other SDGs, making them a linchpin for achieving a range of sustainability goals. For instance, proper land management directly affects clean water availability (Goal 6), equitable land distribution is a key element of reducing inequalities (Goal 10), land-use strategies are a vital part of climate action (Goal 13), and secure land rights bolster peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16). Given these intersections, it's clear that land rights are intricately related to every SDG. Thus, realising other sustainability goals will inevitably hinge on the successful fulfilment of land rights.

In this report, we scrutinize the progress related to land tenure security (Target 1.4) and the gender gap in land rights (Target 5.a). Despite the strong commitments by the head of states pledging to achieve the SDGs, halfway through the implementation timeline, the actions taken towards accomplishing these land rights targets have been inadequate. For instance, the 2023 Oxfam report on progress towards the SDG land rights commitments finds that while some countries have taken steps like reforming inheritance laws, overall progress has been utterly inadequate for meeting the goal of secure tenure rights for all, especially women, by

2030.¹⁶ Analysis of data reported for SDG indicators shows most adults, particularly women, lack land documentation. Another 2023 Oxfam report on progress towards the SDG land degradation and restoration commitments finds that while some countries have taken promising steps, overall action has been insufficient for meeting the goals.¹⁷ The report reviewed country SDG progress reports and found limited evidence of concrete policies or programs to combat land degradation outside of the forestry sector. Data for the relevant SDG indicator 15.3.1 has barely been updated since 2015, with most countries failing to report on it. The report concludes that ‘much more is needed to achieve measurable progress on the ground’ towards restoration and land degradation neutrality, which refers to the amount and quality of land resources necessary to support the ecosystem and enhance food security.¹⁸ The evidence thus shows that the world is far from achieving equal land rights for women to own, access, control or have stewardship over land.

GEF’s action coalitions designate women’s land rights as a critical element in the pursuit of gender equality and climate action.¹⁹ *GEF Action Coalitions on Economic Justice and Rights, Feminist Action for Climate Justice, and Gender-Based Violence* emphasize the need for secure land rights for all, especially for those living in poverty. They further underscore the importance of adopting principles such as feminist leadership, an intersectional approach, and transformative change as catalysts to hasten the attainment of gender equality. By leveraging these principles, they aim to initiate ground-breaking progress for women and girls, making strides towards a more equitable world.²⁰ However, putting these principles into practice remains a significant hurdle for GEF. If GEF effectively mobilizes all stakeholders to adhere to these highlighted principles, it could facilitate attainment of the desired outcomes and catalyze progress towards the achievement of the SDGs.

In the next section, we venture into the domain of women’s land rights from a feminist perspective, examining the micro and macro dimensions within these international frameworks. Our goal is to enrich the understanding of the hurdles and opportunities in actualizing women’s land rights, appreciating the diversity of women’s experiences and the multifaceted aspects of land rights. We embrace the concept of intersectionality in women’s experiences, advocating for a transformative shift that surpasses traditional policy suggestions. In doing so, this paper aspires to offer a roadmap for stakeholders to craft and implement more effective strategies, ensuring women’s land rights are not just an ideal, but a lived reality.

CLOSE-UP ON GRASSROOTS: MICRO-LEVEL ISSUES

Building upon the above discussion, it is crucial to understand that the root causes of women’s lack of access to secure land rights are intricately tied to both micro and macro-level factors. At the micro level, barriers stem from discriminatory social norms, deeply entrenched patriarchal systems, and enduring effects of colonial legacies, which together systematically deny

women secure land tenure. This section delves into the multifaceted challenges faced by women at the community, household and individual levels in asserting and exercising their land rights.

INTERPLAY OF PATRIARCHY, CUSTOM AND MARKET-DRIVEN POLICIES

Patriarchal norms, embedded within societal customs and laws, continue to significantly influence women's access to, and control over, land and resources, often resulting in limited land ownership, inheritance rights and decision-making power for women.²¹ Yet women's vulnerabilities are not merely derived from patriarchal customs. They often emerge from the interplay between customary and legal systems, rapid societal transformations, opportunistic behaviours and power dynamics across various institutions, including state, market, community and household.²² In certain contexts, customary or communal land relations linked to women's roles in specific social groups, such as agricultural or pastoral communities, can offer social benefits and protections to women.

However, these relations are often misunderstood by those in power, who tend to equate concepts of rights, tenure security, and women's empowerment with policies favouring land titling and formal rights recognition. Yet a shift from customary or communal land tenure systems to individualized, market-oriented tenure systems can be detrimental to local communities and women's interests. Many African perspectives situate land within place-based social identities and reciprocal relationships, where people belong to the land rather than owning it in the Western sense.²³ Such individualized, market-oriented approaches may be unsuitable for lands collectively owned by a community and can destabilize existing tenure arrangements, inadvertently undermining women's security.²⁴ Hence, effective advocacy for women's land rights requires a nuanced understanding of diverse societal, cultural and legal norms and a commitment to transform all discriminatory systems, whether customary, religious or legal.

GENDER BIAS IN LAW AND PRACTICE

Gender discriminatory norms, laws and practices severely limit women's decision-making power and control over land across the globe.²⁵ Legal frameworks concerning inheritance and property rights often favour men, leading to unequal land ownership. These inequalities are exacerbated by inheritance regimes that traditionally ensure property is passed down male lines, even in the presence of female heirs.

While certain laws may ostensibly advocate gender equality, their implementation frequently falls short, further restricting women's land rights. This discrepancy between legislation and enforcement is highlighted by Oxfam's study on women's land rights in Africa which reveals that despite a robust legal framework in many African countries, actual enforcement of women's land rights is weak.²⁶ In some countries, administrative practices prohibit joint ownership of land between spouses, with land often only

registered under the man's name as head of household.²⁷ This situation is worsened by administrative practices such as complex land registration processes and biased land allocation committees, which present additional hurdles for women.

Such legal and social constraints contribute to increased economic inequality. Despite women's significant roles in agriculture and other sectors, they usually access resources through male family members, such as fathers or spouses. This indirect access, coupled with barriers to credit and financial services, limits women's opportunities for land acquisition and agricultural investment.²⁸ Without resources or collateral, women often find it challenging to secure loans and other forms of financial support. This gendered cycle of land and financial inequity not only perpetuates social injustices but also hinders broader economic development.

VIOLENCE AND THE BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE WORK

The unequal distribution of unpaid care work within homes and communities, predominantly shouldered by women, has significant implications for women's access to and control over land and other natural resources. The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, coupled with limited access to land and resources, contributes to women's economic dependence and exposes them to multiple forms of violence.²⁹ In many instances, the lack of independent resources and property rights restricts women's ability to escape violent situations or resist exploitative practices.

Secure land tenure can provide women with an economic buffer, thereby reducing their vulnerability to gender-based violence. For instance, studies from rural Tanzania, Nicaragua, and India have shown a correlation between women's land ownership and reduced experiences of intimate partner violence.³⁰ However, in societies where traditional gender roles and norms are firmly entrenched, women's efforts to claim land rights can lead to increased gender-based violence as these efforts challenge existing power dynamics. Therefore, while land rights for women are crucial to reducing gender-based violence, these rights must be accompanied by comprehensive strategies to dismantle patriarchal norms and promote gender equality.

Indigenous women and women in post-colonial societies face compounded challenges due to spiritual violence that disrupts ancestral ties, environmental violence that stems from harmful land uses or degradation, and territorial violence involving physical threats and displacement. Indigenous women bear the brunt of the ongoing destructive effects of colonization, characterized by systemic poverty and usurpation of their land and resources. Coupled with ongoing structural and systemic discrimination, these residual impacts of colonization pose additional hurdles for these women in their struggle to secure land rights.³¹

Therefore, strategies aimed at enhancing women's land rights need to consider the intricate web of unpaid care work, exposure to multiple forms of violence, limited land access and the enduring impact of colonial systems on Indigenous and post-colonial women's lives.

CRISES OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Women – especially those from rural and Indigenous communities – experience significant impacts from climate change and environmental degradation as their identities are often integrally connected with their territories, and they perceive themselves as custodians of the land. The loss of land and resources due to these environmental factors can further erode women's land rights and intensify existing gender inequalities.³² When women have secure access and ownership of land, it gives them autonomy to make decisions and investments that can increase climate resilience and enable adaptation and mitigation measures on their lands.³³ However, women are often excluded from decision-making processes related to climate solutions and environmental conservation due to existing power imbalances. In essence, the intersection of land rights, environmental degradation and conflict puts women, especially those in marginalized communities, at the frontlines of these issues. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and inclusive strategies that not only protect women's land rights but also actively involve them in the resolution of these interconnected issues.

CONFLICTS, DISPLACEMENT AND THREATS TO WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Women, often serving as community caregivers, are particularly susceptible to conflicts. Land and territorial disputes disproportionately affect women, often exposing them to forced displacements, eviction, violence, and loss of livelihoods.³⁴ Women's rights defenders in particular face heightened risks. For instance, in Brazil, women's land rights defenders in the Amazon region are routinely subjected to threats and violence.³⁵ Likewise, in Honduras, women defending their land rights, such as the environmental activist Berta Cáceres, have faced severe threats and even fatal consequences.³⁶ In the Amazon region of Peru, Indigenous women leaders like Augustina Mayan have struggled to defend their community's ancestral lands and resources from encroachment by illegal mining operations. As president of the Organization for the Development of Border Communities of Cenepa (ODECOFROC), Mayan has advocated for Indigenous land rights and protested environmental destruction caused by mining companies. In retaliation, she has faced threats, harassment and violence aimed at silencing her activism. Mayan's case highlights the discrimination and backlash faced by Indigenous women defending their communities' land rights and territories. Her experiences illustrate the need to protect women's land rights defenders and ensure their access to justice.³⁷

BROAD STROKES: MACRO-LEVEL ISSUES

Under the macro lens, a web of economic, political and environmental

factors coalesces to deprive women of secure land tenure, thereby perpetuating gender inequality, poverty and environmental degradation. This section specifically focuses on the root causes at the macro level that impede women's access to secure land rights. These include the large-scale land acquisitions often propelled by neoliberal economic policies, climate change solutions that inadvertently lead to land grabbing, systemic underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes, and increased vulnerabilities precipitated by global crises such as pandemics. These forces often intersect and amplify the multifaceted challenges that women face at the community, household, and individual levels in their pursuit of land rights. In this section we examine these macro level systemic obstacles to women's land rights.

THE SIEGE OF LARGE-SCALE LAND ACQUISITIONS AND PRIVATIZATION OF COMMUNAL LANDS

Land, water and resource grabbing, state-sponsored 'development' aggression and neoliberal globalization policies, including free trade and investment agreements strongly promoted by international financial institutions, have set the stage for large-scale land acquisitions and the privatization of communal lands.³⁸ These neoliberal policies promote foreign direct investment in developing countries and prioritize corporate interests over people, often leading governments and companies to facilitate massive land deals without adequately consulting affected communities. This sweeping transformation disproportionately uproots communities lacking security over their land, triggering displacement and loss of livelihoods. Women, often deprived of formal land rights and heavily reliant on natural resources for their daily survival, find themselves particularly exposed to eviction and displacement, victims of their marginalized position within society.³⁹ Neoliberal policies have enabled this corporate land rush by emphasizing deregulation, privatization and market-driven approaches over protection of communal lands and local resource rights.⁴⁰

THE MIRAGE OF FALSE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Projects designed solely for climate change mitigation – such as large-scale afforestation, bioenergy crops, BECCS, or green energy projects like wind farms or mineral mining for electric vehicle batteries – can inadvertently instigate land grabbing, infringing upon or violating the rights of local communities.⁴¹

The heavy reliance on land as a panacea to climate change not only avoids urgent emissions reductions but also exacerbates land inequality and women's land rights erosion. Oxfam calculations reveal the total land area potentially needed for planned carbon removal could equal all global farmland.⁴² This enormous land demand could displace communities, deepen hunger, and disproportionately harm women.⁴³ It is particularly concerning where land rights are informal or unclear.⁴⁴ For instance, expanding palm oil plantations in Indonesia has violated villagers' rights, especially women farmers, through peatland drainage for plantations.⁴⁵ Entities funding land-based climate solutions must consider potential

negative impacts on communities' land rights. Adequate consultation and consent processes with local groups are essential to avoid worsening land inequality.

THE DEADLY CONFLUENCE OF EXTRACTIVE MACROECONOMIC POLICIES, MILITARISM AND AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE

The deadly convergence of extractive macroeconomic policies, militarism and authoritarian governance hands large corporations an unprecedented level of power and impunity, enabling them to orchestrate massive land and resource grabs across regions.⁴⁶ Neoliberal policies like free trade and investment agreements have decimated local economies and pillaged local resources by prioritizing the interests of corporations over people and promoting deregulation, privatization and market-driven approaches.⁴⁷ International financial institutions have strongly pushed and reinforced such neoliberal policies in the Global South.⁴⁸ These dynamics have pushed rural and Indigenous women and their communities into extreme poverty and marginalization by disrupting local livelihoods and increasing land inequality. The overreliance on extractive industries like mining, logging and industrial agriculture, often endorsed and driven by neoliberal policies that emphasize deregulation and resource privatization, exacerbates these issues.⁴⁹ This further deepens the divide, increasing land inequality and exacerbating the vulnerability of women and their communities. To address these issues effectively, a critical reassessment of these neoliberal policies and the patterns of resource extraction they promote is urgently needed.

THE IRON GRIP OF PATRIARCHAL LAWS AND UNDERREPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

The movement for women's land rights has made significant strides, advocating for robust and progressive instruments. International instruments such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), the SDGs, the GEF Action Coalitions, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), in particular the General Recommendation No. 39 from the CEDAW Committee, are all designed to protect and secure individual and collective women's rights, including lands rights. However, the implementation and domestication of these instruments require the unwavering political will of governments and adequate budget allocations.

With changing donor interests, funding for women's land rights sector has been dwindling. A comparative analysis conducted by the Institute for Poverty, Land, and Agrarian Studies across seven African countries revealed significant gaps between policy presence and on-the-ground implementation.⁵⁰ Head of states often make commitments that remain unfulfilled. For instance, African heads of state committed to reach the target of having 30% of land registered by women by 2025. However, research assessing land policy in Africa indicates that this target is unlikely

to be achieved, due to the lack of substantial on-the-ground initiatives.⁵¹

Some projects also continue to disregard the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), a principle that allows communities to give or withhold their consent to proposed projects that may affect their lands, resources, livelihoods and communities, ensuring that these processes are conducted free of coercion or manipulation, prior to any authorization or commencement of activities.⁵² Articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), FPIC is derived from the Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination.⁵³ FPIC is recommended or mandated in several international instruments and standards. According to the CEDAW General Recommendation No. 39, FPIC processes must specifically include Indigenous women to address their unique vulnerabilities and rights.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, many initiatives bypass meaningful engagement with all rights holders in communities. Governments often approve these projects under the guise of serving the 'public purpose,' justifying compulsory land acquisition. This lack of meaningful community engagement contributes to the myriad exclusions that women confront, ranging from limited access to quality education to discriminatory governance systems.

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS AND THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced an array of challenges to women's quest for land and resource rights. Neoliberal globalization policies have left public health systems stretched thin, inadequately equipped to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic.⁵⁵ Failures in governmental responses to the virus, often marked by militaristic approaches, have disproportionately affected marginalized women, undermining their rights to food, land and resources.⁵⁶

Even amidst the pandemic, issues of land and resource appropriation persisted, further marginalizing and displacing communities.⁵⁷ Both governments and corporations, in their race towards economic recovery post-pandemic, have rushed land and resource investments. This often involves bypassing customary authorisation and community consultation procedures and consent, intensifying pressures on community lands in various countries such as Liberia and Colombia. This approach risks triggering local conflicts, jeopardizing women's land rights, and increasing their vulnerability.⁵⁸

Conflicts and wars further debilitate governance systems, compromising their ability to protect and uphold the rights of their citizens, particularly women. These turbulent situations often result in a power vacuum, paving the way for rampant land grabs and dispossession. As such, in these contexts, women's rights to land and resources are typically ignored, further exacerbating their vulnerability. In the Arab region specifically, securing women's land rights is critical for realising human rights and achieving development goals, such as socioeconomic development and poverty elimination.⁵⁹ However, discriminatory laws and norms hamper women's empowerment and participation in the region. Inheritance is the

primary avenue for women to access land, but widespread inheritance renunciation practices disadvantage women.⁶⁰ In conflict situations, upholding women's housing, land and property empowers their role as peacemakers and enables economic recovery, thus helping prevent re-ignition of conflicts and assist in emerging from war.⁶¹

Thus, the ongoing pandemic and conflict situations present significant roadblocks in the struggle for women's land rights, underscoring the need for proactive and inclusive policies to protect these rights in times of crisis.

3 COMMITMENTS AND ROADBLOCKS: A CRITICAL REVIEW

The SDGs and GEF highlight numerous commitments to women's land rights, encompassing legal reforms (SDG 5.a), women's participation in governance (SDG 5.5), gender-responsive policies (SDG 1.4), climate-resilient strategies (SDG 13) and environmental conservation and restoration (SDG 15).⁶² These commitments signify international recognition of these issues' critical importance and the need to do what is necessary to meet agreed targets by 2030. Furthermore, the GEF Action Coalition commitments aim to respond to the deficit of commitments made at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing and accelerate change for women and girls.⁶³

GEF has six bold themes, namely:

- gender-based violence;
- economic justice and rights;
- bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- feminist action for climate justice;
- technology and innovation for gender equality;
- feminist movement and leadership.⁶⁴

GEF action coalitions have devised three guiding principles, which are intended to fuel the fulfilment of women's rights:

- transformation;
- feminist leadership;
- intersectionality.

The degree to which these principles are implemented and influential is pivotal in determining whether the GEF's commitments will catalyse genuine progress for women's rights. However, substantial roadblocks continue to impede these initiatives.

GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Upon signing the SDG commitments, governments worldwide pledged to ensure all men and women, particularly the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources. This includes access to basic services, ownership, control over land and other property, inheritance, and natural resources.⁶⁵ To end hunger in all its forms, governments promised to improve productivity through equal access to land and other productivity resources by 2030.⁶⁶ To achieve Goal 5 (gender equality), they committed to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, and access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with

national laws.⁶⁷ Through SDG 13, governments also committed to taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, including strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters.⁶⁸ Through SDG 15, they pledged to promote, protect and restore all natural resources, including land, and combat desertification and land degradation.⁶⁹

However, seven years since the adoption of the SDGs, there is a noticeable lack of tangible implementation on the ground. Our review of SDG reports over the past seven years reveals that strong commitments lack execution. The number of people suffering from hunger increased from 790 million in 2016 to 828 million in 2021.⁷⁰ The SDG report in 2020 demonstrated that small-scale farmers face numerous challenges and difficulties accessing land and other productive resources, along with information, financial services, markets and opportunities, compared to large-scale farmers.⁷¹ The productivity of small-scale farmers is systematically lower, and their income is less, based on the data collected in 2020. The COVID-19 lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus caused businesses and local markets to close, leaving small-scale food producers unable to deliver their products to consumers. Land degradation is on the rise. The SDG report of 2022 showed that human activities, intensified by climate change, drive land degradation, directly affecting 1.3 billion people. If land degradation continues at its current rate, we can expect an additional 1.5 billion hectares of degraded land by 2030.⁷²

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND LAND TENURE SECURITY

Advancing SDG land commitments and securing land rights for all necessitates that governments bridge the gap between their land rights-related legal and policy frameworks and their on-ground implementation. This requires strengthening administrative frameworks, implementing programmatic action to ensure and enforce tenure rights, and closing the gender gap in land access. The SDG 2022 report revealed significant room for improvement in the protection of women's land and property rights. Data from 2009–2020 covering 36 countries showed that in 30 countries, less than half of women had ownership and/or secure tenure rights over agricultural land. In 18 of these countries, the share of men owning land was twice that of women. Only 15 out of 52 countries were reported to have sufficient legal provisions to protect women from losing their land.⁷³

The SDG *Progress Report Special Edition 2023* reveals a deficiency in legal provisions for protecting women's land rights in many countries. Data for 2009–2020 covering 46 countries shows a widespread lack of ownership and/or secure tenure rights over agricultural land for both women and men involved in agricultural production. In one-third of the countries, less than 50% of women and men have ownership or secure rights over agricultural land. The share of men owning land is at least twice that of women in almost half of the countries. Of the 68 countries that reported on women's rights to land ownership and/or control in their legal frameworks by 2022, only about 31% had laws that considerably protect women's land rights (a score of at least 5 out of 6), while 47% provided poor protection for women's land rights (a score of 3 out of 6 or below).⁷⁴

DATA COLLECTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Accurate, timely land data is critical for advocating policies, legal frameworks, and decisions relating to protection of vulnerable communities' land rights.⁷⁵ However, land data is often highly politicized, as control of information signifies power.⁷⁶ The 2022 Land Portal report underscores the significant power implications of owning and accessing land data, emphasizing the power dynamics around land data control.⁷⁷

Thus, limited and inconsistent data on women's land rights and agricultural contributions underestimates priorities for securing their tenure and investing in women farmers, who comprise 43% of the agricultural workforce despite owning just 20% of land.⁷⁸ Reliable, inclusive data is vital for policies and financing to progress women's land rights, as it directs policy creation, laws, implementation and budget allocations.

FUNDING CHALLENGES AND EFFECT OF INACTION

Achieving the goals set by governments concerning women's rights, including land rights, is significantly hindered by insufficient funding. Action coalitions aim to mobilize funding to deliver on these commitments. However, a survey conducted one year after the implementation of the GEF reveals a significant funding gap, potentially delaying the realization of these commitments.⁷⁹ While several commitment-makers pledged to finance the GEF commitments, it is crucial to ensure these funds reach the most vulnerable and genuinely transform the lives of impoverished men and women.

Rising land inequality, which disproportionately affects women, underscores the urgent need for transformative, intersectional and feminist action.⁸⁰ If these commitments are not translated into action, land inequality will continue to escalate. The lack of action is similarly evident in the case of the SDG's Life on Land goal, which aimed to combat land degradation by 2030. Due to inaction, the world lost at least 100 million hectares of healthy and productive land annually between 2015 and 2019, which significantly impacts global food and water security. If land degradation continues at its current pace, an additional 1.5 billion hectares of land will be degraded by 2030.⁸¹

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

The erosion of civic space in numerous countries jeopardises the safety and wellbeing of women's land rights and environmental defenders. The GEF Action Coalition on Feminist Action on Climate Justice (FACJ) includes an action that addresses the transition to an inclusive and regenerative green economy. This action acknowledges the interconnectedness of climate change with gender justice issues and seeks to protect and amplify the voices of grassroots and Indigenous communities, including frontline defenders, in social and political spheres.⁸²

However, the accountability report following the first year of GEF

implementation indicates that threats to these defenders persist. In 2021 alone, 358 human rights defenders were reported killed, with 60% of these individuals being land, environmental and Indigenous rights defenders.⁸³ Women defenders face additional gender-based violence and threats.⁸⁴ This is especially true for Indigenous women, who view their ancestral territories as an extension of their bodies and Mother Earth.⁸⁵

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Feminist leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring that women, youth, indigenous people and other marginalized communities directly participate in and influence decisions that affect their lives.⁸⁶ This form of leadership involves self-reflection and the transformation of power dynamics. Although feminist leadership is a core principle of the GEF, it remains under-emphasized.

Grassroots women's movements and feminist organizations need a more substantial role in shaping and implementing land policies and programs. Globally, the weaker land rights of women have resulted in their exclusion from decision-making platforms, making them more susceptible to displacement and exploitation.⁸⁷ Thus, strengthening feminist leadership is integral to achieving gender equality and securing women's land rights.

OVERALL PROGRESS AND FURTHER ACTIONS NEEDED

So far, progress towards securing women's land rights and land-related SDG targets has been insufficient. Substantial additional actions are necessary to ensure that these goals are realized, especially for women, small-scale producers, marginalized groups, Indigenous Peoples, and ethnic minorities. This encompasses advancing the SDG land commitments to secure land rights for all, filling gaps in the legal and policy frameworks related to land rights, and launching programmatic actions to increase tenure rights and address the gender gap in land ownership.

Moving forward, we must confront these challenges to create a world where women's land rights are unequivocally respected and upheld in policies and laws as well as in practice, paving the way for a sustainable and equitable future. The fight for women's land rights is far from over, and it demands unwavering commitment, innovative solutions and genuine collaboration from all stakeholders involved.

THE URGENCY OF TRANSFORMATION: A TURNING POINT

The pursuit of a more equitable world as outlined in international frameworks such as the SDGs and the GEF action coalitions calls for a more robust feminist approach. To realise their promises, we must foster systemic transformations that address the intricate issues of women's land rights at the grassroots level. Governments, as the principal implementers of these frameworks, must boldly confront patriarchal norms, enforce just

legal frameworks, amplify women's voices in land governance, and take into account the intersectionality of their experiences.

Understanding that land rights intersect with complex issues of decolonization, rooted in historical contexts, cultural norms and power dynamics, is pivotal. These factors have often disadvantaged women, thereby necessitating an approach that is as intersectional as it is decolonial. Such an approach not only involves the application of norms and protection frameworks but also empowers women through legal knowledge, enabling them to identify and address their unmet legal needs. The lack of an intersectional and decolonial approach to justice is a significant obstacle to the implementation of the commitments assumed, and it is here that the work with and from women becomes fundamental.

Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding that goes beyond the mere issuance of land titles or the promotion of private land ownership. Such seemingly progressive approaches could inadvertently undermine Indigenous and collective customary systems, which are integral to safeguarding Indigenous women's rights to land, forests and waters. These systems often promote collective use and management of land and are vital in preserving Indigenous women's self-determination, territorial governance and unique relationships with their lands, as emphasized by Recommendation No. 39 of the Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Achieving lasting change calls for a paradigm shift from a coloniality of power towards an all-encompassing, gender-transformative approach.⁸⁸ The old models of development that exploit lands, bodies and territories must be replaced with systems that recognize the sustainability of life as an overriding priority, acknowledging women's central role in this pursuit. A profound transformation of power structures is needed to ensure a development model that doesn't marginalize but empowers, especially those on the frontlines of land stewardship.

Guiding this transformation are the principles of gender transformation, feminist leadership and intersectionality, all of which must underpin our strategies and approaches in addressing the root causes of women's lack of secure land tenure.

Gender transformation in land rights implies dismantling entrenched norms, power dynamics and legal structures that perpetuate land rights inequalities. It involves appreciating the multifaceted identities of women – including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and environmental realities – and understanding how these identities intersect with land rights.

Feminist leadership in land rights involves uplifting the voices of women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, in land governance dialogues. It includes supporting grassroots movements and organizations advocating for women's land rights, ensuring women's representation at all levels of land governance.

The principle of **intersectionality in land rights** appreciates the unique struggles women face in diverse contexts, necessitating customized

solutions to secure their land rights. These struggles are particularly severe for women in conflict zones, Indigenous women and those confronting multiple layers of discrimination.

By departing from the coloniality of power and embracing principles of gender transformation, feminist leadership and intersectionality, the SDGs and GEF coalitions can unlock the potential to fulfil their commitments towards securing women's land rights and, more broadly, advancing gender equality.

4 A CALL TO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS

With a view to promoting gender equality in land rights, we recommend interventions that aim to reform laws, adapt social norms, ensure equal security of land rights, give equal weight to women's interests, support women's optimal land use, improve women's ability to generate value from land and support self-directed decision-making on land. Furthermore, mechanisms should be in place to enforce women's land rights when under threat and provide support to land rights defenders.

Incorporating the above, the following recommendations are directed to stakeholders working in the women's land rights landscape:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS

Policy development and legal reform:

- Develop and implement gender-responsive land policies that consider the diverse realities of women's lives, informed by robust data and inclusive consultations with women at all societal levels.
- Actively reform laws, whether formal, religious or customary, to eliminate discriminatory clauses and ensure that both women and men have equal opportunities to acquire and exercise land rights. This should involve a comprehensive review of existing laws and consultation with legal experts and women's rights organizations.
- Engage in a decolonial approach to policy-making that challenges and dismantles structures of power and inequality rooted in colonial legacies. This includes reevaluating and reforming land governance systems, as well as customary, formal and religious laws in a manner that is conscious of and responsive to historical and ongoing impacts of colonization. Additionally, policies should be designed to acknowledge and respect Indigenous and local knowledge systems and their respective land tenure systems.
- Give priority to gender-responsive land policies and programs in budget allocation and strategic planning. These policies should aim to empower women and marginalized communities, including through land redistribution and legal aid programs.

Social norms and attitudes:

- Launch public education campaigns to challenge and change social norms, attitudes or behaviours that exclude women from fully realizing their land rights. Collaborate with community leaders, schools and media to disseminate messages that promote gender equality in land rights.

Justice and law enforcement:

- Strengthen law enforcement mechanisms to ensure that both women's and men's land rights are equally secure. This should include the training of law enforcement officers and judiciary personnel on women's land rights and the international human rights instruments, such as the General Recommendation No. 39 from the CEDAW Committee.
- In addition to standard legal frameworks, promote and fund restorative justice practices that emphasize repairing the harm caused by discrimination and injustice. Such practices should be culturally sensitive and involve local communities, especially women, in shaping and implementing them.
- Rigorously enforce laws that protect women's land rights, especially in cases of dispute or when rights are threatened, either from within communities or by external entities such as corporations. Provide legal support to women facing such threats and enforce penalties for violations of women's land rights.

Inclusion and representation:

- Encourage and facilitate the participation of women in land governance roles, from local land committees to national land boards. Ensure that decision-making processes about land rights and land use are inclusive and that women's interests are given equal weight to men's interests.
- Support feminist organizations and women's grassroots movements by providing them with funding and training opportunities and include them in policy-making and consultation processes to ensure that land policies and practices are shaped by those most affected.

Transparency and accountability:

- Regularly and transparently monitor and report progress towards SDG targets and GEF commitments on women's land rights. Establish accountability mechanisms that allow for constructive feedback and complaints from the public regarding the implementation of these commitments.
- Design and fund initiatives aimed at enhancing women's legal literacy and providing them with the tools to understand, use and shape the law in the context of land rights. This could be achieved through conducting community legal education programs, providing free or subsidised legal aid services, and creating user-friendly legal resources. Such initiatives will empower women to assert and defend their land rights effectively, thereby enhancing their access to justice.
- Generate data on land uses and ownership by engaging different stakeholders. Ensure the data is intersectional by highlighting various social factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, class and caste. Make this data available to civil society and the general public to ensure transparency and engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

- Actively fund gender-responsive land initiatives, not only through monetary contributions but also by offering technical support such as capacity-building, mentoring and knowledge sharing. This can be achieved by establishing or contributing to specific funds dedicated to women's land rights or including such initiatives in wider development funding portfolios.
- Support research initiatives and independent monitoring bodies that track the implementation of commitments made by policy makers on women's land rights. This could involve funding specific research projects, partnerships with civil society organisations, including academic institutions, or establishing grants for independent oversight bodies.
- Offer financial assistance, legal aid and security support to those who are on the frontline of defending women's land rights. This could include funding for legal defence costs, security training and emergency aid for human rights defenders under threat. The support should also extend to initiatives aimed at changing laws or policies that endanger women's land rights defenders.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES

- Incorporate standards to respect and protect land rights, which should guide investment strategies. These should ensure that women's land rights are promoted and safeguarded in all corporate activities, especially in instances of large-scale land acquisitions. This should also include conducting due diligence and employing gender-sensitive consultation and consent mechanisms before land investments, ensuring that land acquisitions do not disenfranchise women.
- Uphold the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in all interactions with local communities and landholders. This requires meaningful consultations with women and ensuring their active participation and fair compensation in any land deals.
- Sponsor or support initiatives that aim to transform discriminatory social norms and strengthen women's leadership in land governance. This could take the form of funding, technical support, capacity building or public endorsement of such initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NGOS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

- Advocate for land policies and legal reforms that take a feminist and intersectional approach. This could include lobbying efforts, public awareness campaigns or participatory research that highlights the

unique experiences and needs of diverse women.

- Provide resources, training and support to strengthen the capacity of women's organizations to advocate for their rights. This could involve providing training in advocacy techniques, offering resources for campaign work, or facilitating networking opportunities.
- Partner with women's organizations to empower women and marginalized communities in land governance and decision-making processes. This might include joint projects, coalition-building and creating platforms for women to voice their concerns and aspirations.
- Support initiatives that enable women to make optimal use of their land and promote their stewardship. This could involve technical assistance, capacity-building activities, and resources to help women maximize the benefits from their land, while also promoting sustainable land use.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Recognize the central role of women's land rights in achieving sustainable development and articulate this in all international development discourses and platforms.
- Provide technical and financial assistance to initiatives that promote women's land rights. This could involve bilateral aid, grants, loans and capacity-building programs specifically targeted at improving women's land rights.
- Include specific commitments to advancing women's land rights in all relevant international agreements. This means ensuring that women's land rights are addressed in the drafting and negotiation of international treaties and agreements, and followed up with robust mechanisms for monitoring and accountability.

In conclusion, the mission for women's land rights calls for a concerted effort from all stakeholders, working together to dismantle the barriers to gender equality, economic justice and climate resilience. When we adopt a lens that is feminist, intersectional and gender-transformative, we engage in a powerful collaboration that champions women's land rights within the realm of international commitments. Uniting in this endeavour, we can sculpt a world where every woman has the land rights she needs to thrive, fostering a future that is just, equal and resplendent with possibilities. We urge immediate and decisive action to bridge the gap between international commitments and their actual implementation on the ground.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Women's land rights stand as a cornerstone for achieving gender equality, economic justice and resilience in the face of climate change. Yet despite the groundwork laid by the SDGs and the GEF, the gap between international commitments and their implementation on the ground is strikingly wide. The vast chasm we face stems from entrenched power structures that persistently engender gender and land inequalities.

This review exposes a disconcerting truth: progress towards a world where women enjoy equal land rights is laborious and slow, marred by disparities and lapses. International commitments intended to stimulate change often overlook the richness of feminist perspectives and fail to appreciate the multifaceted experiences of women, shaped by their unique sociocultural environments.⁸⁹ The potential harm of weak or misguided solutions in these commitments might not just be unhelpful but could potentially worsen land rights scenarios on a global scale.⁹⁰ The urgency to adopt a gender transformative stance, amplify feminist leadership and appreciate the intersectionality of experiences has never been greater. These elements are vital in our shared journey to safeguard women's land rights.

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