

Women Gaining Ground: Securing Land Rights as a Critical Pillar of Climate Change Strategy

As the bulk of the world's poor and those who most rely on land and natural resources for their livelihood, women are hardest hit by climate change. Research shows that women in the regions of the world most affected by climate change, Africa and South Asia, bear the brunt of increased natural disasters, displacement, unpredictable rain fall, decreased food production, and increased hunger and poverty. Women farmers are particularly at risk. Their rights to access, use, control, and manage land are often diluted or denied. While women grow the bulk of the food in many countries, they **rarely control the land that they till**. Often women's rights to land depend on relationship to male family members. Laws and social norms often limit or ignore women's land and property rights and routinely exclude women from decision-making on land and natural resources.

Emerging evidence suggests that when women hold secure rights to land, efforts to tackle climate change are more successful, and responsibilities and benefits associated with climate change response programs are more equitably distributed. Conversely, without effective legal control over the land they farm or the proceeds of their labor, women often lack the incentive, security, opportunity, or authority to make decisions about ways to conserve the land and to ensure its long-term productivity. Women in this situation know that if they work to irrigate their field or plant border trees, there is a good chance that they will not be the ones to reap the benefits.

The stakes are high: while **securing women's land rights fosters critical gains**, from enhanced social status, to greater food security, better health and educational outcomes for families, neglecting to do so could have significant negative effects on the wellbeing of women, children and their greater communities. Women's security of tenure, especially for smallholder farmers, must inform ongoing climate change knowledge-generation, discussions, and interventions.

With secure land rights, women farmers could be more likely to:

Increase crop yields.

About **70% of rural women in South Asia and more than 60% in Africa are farmers**. By some predictions the yields of **rain-fed crops in certain African countries will be cut in half by 2020** due to climate change. Homes where women have land rights report **greater yields and increased food security**.

Conserve soil.

A **World Bank study** in Uganda found that when individuals had secure rights to land, they were more likely to use soil conservation techniques. In Ethiopia, **small farmers with land rights were 60% more likely to make investments that prevent soil erosion**.

Plant more trees.

A **study of 90 countries** found that, as land rights instability increased, natural forests decreased. Increased land tenure security, in contrast, is linked with decreased deforestation

rates, according to a **118-country study over five years**.

Improve large-scale mitigation efforts.

Large scale **climate-mitigation interventions are more effective when they fully recognize women as stakeholders and compensate women for "secondary" uses of forest lands**, like gathering fuelwood and non-timber products.

Recover from natural disasters.

While **natural disasters already affect women more adversely than men**, because of insecure, informal or undocumented land rights, **women are often less able to recover land and livelihoods post-disaster**. Following the 2004 tsunami, for example, the Sri Lankan government **offered funding only to male-headed households** in some areas, rendering affected widows and single women ineligible for support.

Call to Action

Climate change and associated human responses have affected, and will continue to affect, women's land rights in rural areas in ways that are only beginning to emerge. At the same time, securing women's land rights could enhance resiliency to climate change and strengthen communities' ability to respond well to shifting circumstances. Yet, to date, the relationship between climate change and women's land rights has been largely unexplored. We therefore call for a collaborative, gender-responsive, climate-informed research and advocacy agenda focused on the transformative potential of women's land rights as a critical piece in the climate change puzzle. Governments and policy makers also stand to gain from grounding climate change strategies in approaches based on decades of experience and expertise in the power of land rights to empower and lift women, men, and communities out of poverty. Such approaches call for:

1. Securing women's rights to land and natural resources, including within communities

Clearly defined, recognized, durable, and documented rights to land and natural resources are both an incentive to invest in conservation and sustainable land use, and a precondition for women (as well as men and communities) to access and benefit from market-based mechanisms, such as payments for environmental services, including reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). Secure land rights make women and their communities more resilient and capable of adapting to and recovering from climate change impacts. Equipped with secure, stable, documented rights to access, use, control, manage, inherit, and, if relevant, own and transfer land, women and families are better able to cope and recover following climate-related disasters, including through access to services and compensation tied to land ownership or use.

2. Ensuring women's meaningful participation in decision-making and dispute resolution related to access, use, control, and management of land and natural resources

While frequently worst impacted by climate change, women are often excluded from land and resource management, as well as from planning and implementation of strategies, mechanisms, and actions to address climate change. With more secure rights to land, women often gain not only status, but also a more powerful say in decision-making bodies. Excluding or diluting women's input often results in land and climate change-related policies that fail to account for gendered realities, interests, and knowledge. This could lead to missed opportunities for greater and more effective impact, such as the creation of national action plans that tackle climate-induced harms and gender inequality.

3. Identifying and supporting research and sex-disaggregated data collection related to climate change and women's land rights

Context specific, sex-disaggregated data on the differential constraints and impacts women and men face with regards to climate change and associated responses is critical for effective policy interventions. Such data is needed to inform measures to address insecure land tenure of women and disaster risk reduction, and to apply more broadly to the design and implementation of climate change response strategies. Despite growing literature on gender and climate change, there is a dearth of research on the links to secure land rights for women. Additional research is needed to examine gender-based differences in roles, responsibilities, interests, contributions, and constraints in adaptation and mitigation policies and the links to and impact on land rights, which fundamentally depends on better, sex-disaggregated data on land access, ownership, and tenure security. Such research should address both the impact of climate change on land rights for women, and ways security of tenure for women might ease adverse climate consequences.

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