

Singular Shared Vision and Collective Action to Advance Women's Land Rights

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SUMMARY

Women's land rights are foundational for achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda and African Union Agenda 2063. This article reinforces the need for collective action based on a singular shared vision towards a people-centered land governance in which women's land rights (WLRs) are guaranteed. The synergies generated by this collective action help create and uphold laws protecting WLRs and create opportunities for women to engage in productive activities, leading to improved livelihoods and women's economic independence, greater social cohesion and stability.

This article intends to discuss the required efforts to advance WLRs, and how to leverage synergies to harness momentum and grow support for WLRs throughout the African continent. The article is based on the analysis of the collaboration between the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG), African Regional Network (ARN) and the Stand for Her Land (S4HL) Campaign, and the engagement of the African Union Commission (AUC) in advancing WLRs. The recommendations provided in this article are a result of the systematization of several discussions held during the Conference for Land Policy in Africa - CLPA 2023 - involving FIG-ARN, AUC, and S4HL.

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1. Introduction

Access to land is crucial to promote prosperous, stable, and peaceful societies. As land becomes scarce, there is increased competition to access and benefit from it. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), although most women in rural areas depend on land for their livelihood, their land rights are often limited to the use of land but not to control or own land or to alienate and transfer it, and they are more likely than men to be landless and to have fewer rights than men. Estimates indicate that, although women are responsible for 60-80% of food production (FAO, 2018b, 2018a; Ndi, 2019b; Raney et al., 2011; World Bank et al., 2009), less than 15 percent of all landholders are women (FAO, 2018b; OECD, 2019; Treinen & Elstraeten, 2018), and, in SSA, one in every two women feel insecure with regards to their land (Prindex, 2020).

The most substantial barriers to women's land rights (WLRs) are related to legal, institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and educational constraints (Balas et al., 2022). Several countries have established legal frameworks stipulating that everyone can have access to land on equal terms by law. However, the legislation still has gaps, and many regulations have not been fully implemented (Belay & Abza, 2020; Khuzwayo et al., 2019; Santpoort et al., 2021). Additionally, the coexistence of different legal systems in a country brings complexity, overlaps, and sometimes contradictions, as traditions and power relations prevent women from effectively enjoying their rights, as opposed to the statutory law (World Bank, 2022). The social practices that highly discriminate against women, allowing them only to use the land but hardly to own, control and decide on it, aggravate the women's economic well-being, social status, empowerment and resilience (ActionAid International, 2008; Agarwal, 1994; Bizoza, 2019; Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020; FAO, 2012b; Ndi, 2019a; Paradza et al., 2020) and put women in a fragile position in the agricultural value chain (Bizoza, 2019), which increases inefficiencies in the economy (Nilsson, 2016) and prevents the eradication of hunger and poverty (FAO, 2012b).

Guaranteeing WLRs can help lift women, their families, and their communities out of poverty. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) advocates that if women had access to the same resources as men, they could increase food production by 20-30% (FAO, 2012a). Other sources indicate that women would be able to mitigate and recover from climate shocks (Bizoza, 2019; FAO, 2021; UNWomen, 2022) and have more bargaining power and decision-making over land and natural resources (Djurfeldt, 2020; IOM, 2016; Namubiru-Mwaura, 2014).

In the past decades, the world acknowledged WLRs as foundational to sustainable development and that without gender-equitable land rights, there cannot be gender equality. To date, several ~~protocols and agendas reinforce the need to give women equal rights to access, ownership, and~~ Singular Vision and Collective Action Are Required to Promote Women's Access to Land and Land Tenure Security (12483)

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control over land, including the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure, the Maputo Protocol, the African Union Agenda 2063, the Kilimanjaro Rural Women Charter of Demands, the African Union (AU) Declaration of Land Issues and Challenges in Africa, among others. In 2016, the African Union (AU) launched a campaign to allocate 30 percent of land to African Women by 2025 for Africa's economic transformation. This ambitious target is a prerequisite for achieving both Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda (UNECA, 2016).

Despite these efforts, gender equality in land access and land tenure security is still far from a reality. For these instruments to become effective, multi-faceted and interconnected, international, regional, and national efforts are required. The main objective of this article is to identify critical actions for different stakeholders to harness momentum and grow support for WLRs throughout the African continent through the synergies created by partnerships.

This is especially relevant for the collaboration between the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) African Regional Network (ARN) and the Stand for Her Land (S4HL) Campaign, and the engagement of the African Union Commission (AUC) in advancing WLRs. As the international representative body of surveying professionals, FIG has a crucial role in realizing women's equitable access to and control of land, providing a platform to inform and inspire the community of surveying and land professionals. The Stand For Her Land (S4HL) campaign is a global collaboration to advance secure and equitable land, housing, and property rights for women globally that works via collective, locally developed, and locally led advocacy to ensure that land tenure governance, reforms, and processes equitably include, benefit, and are led by women. The AUC seeks the advancement of WLRs and reinforces the need to work through targeted policy interventions, legal reforms, and awareness campaigns to elevate the status of women as critical stakeholders in land governance.

2. Advancing Women's Land Rights in Africa

Advancing WLRs in Africa requires concerted actions from several stakeholders. These actions need to consider that:

- (i) It "*takes a village*" working together to change the current gender inequality in land access and land tenure security – where every effort and every stakeholder matters. The lack of communication between all stakeholders, which usually work in an isolated manner result in that all efforts do not produce the expected results.
- (ii) There is a need for a "revolution" of mindsets and behaviors from governments and public institutions, as well as from communities and households. Current customary practices influence women's land access and ability to control, own, and decide on land and *natural* resources. Not much change will be seen unless we dare to change the harmful practices. This revolution requires primarily empowering women and girls and promoting their education. Still, it also involves sensitizing men and educating boys so that future generations see gender equality as a norm, not an exception.
- (iii) It is critical to "*think big but take small and steady steps*" towards a singular shared vision of a *people-centered land governance, where WLRs are guaranteed*. Thinking

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big based on this singular shared vision is a must. However, changing cultural practices and behaviors and changing how laws are implemented cannot happen overnight. There is, therefore, an urgency to implement small changes daily to alleviate women's precarious conditions. These small changes, when combined, can produce impactful results.

2.1. Concerted Multi-Stakeholder Efforts

The proposed actions are based on the systematization of several discussions organized within the Conference for Land Policy in Africa - CLPA 2023 – held in Addis Ababa last November, with the support of the High-Level Forum Meeting (HLFM) of Presidents of Land Associations in Africa, the African Union Commission, and the S4HL Campaign. The discussions focused on how to leverage synergies and develop concrete actions to advance Women's Land Rights across the African continent. Several experts from large groups were invited to participate, including policymakers, traditional leaders, heads of national land associations, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), academia and research institutions, donor agencies, private sector, and technology players.

Implementing the legal framework

During the discussions, participants indicated that, in most cases, the problem does not reside in the law itself but in the weak implementation of the law. This does not mean that laws cannot be improved to eliminate some of the existing gaps and contradictions, especially when multiple systems (legal pluralism) are in place. However, participants indicated that in most countries, there are already conditions to promote gender justice in access, control, and ownership of land through the existing legal frameworks and that Governments are essential stakeholders in enforcing the correct implementation of the legal framework. Additionally, given the current gender gap in land access and land tenure security, Governments must stimulate positive discrimination, ensuring women are part of land boards and land committees, providing the means for women's voices to be heard.

Land institutions should effectively implement the legal framework and become more responsive to the needs of citizens. This includes capacity building of public servants and monitoring and control of land administration and land management processes to ensure compliance with the legal framework. Land institutions must also ensure that conflict resolution forums are gender-sensitive, which may be enhanced by incorporating gender officials in these forums.

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Land professionals, particularly FIG and S4HL members, are determined to promote gender-just and equitable ownership and control over land and natural resources. These professionals can determine a lot concerning land decisions, help implement the law, and provide training to community paralegals and legal counseling to women facing land-related disputes. Land professionals can also support collecting and disseminating Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) data, which in turn helps the decision-making process.

Critical actions moving forward:

1. **Public servant capacity building** to implement laws, monitor effectiveness of legal framework implementation and identify when and how to introduce controls or reforms to influence social behaviors. **Capacity building to be undertaken by: Government Departments with support from Professional Associations, Multilateral donors (including related initiatives such as S4HL), FIG, etc.**
2. **Clearly document actions land professionals can take to promote gender-justice.** FIG and S4HL should work together to clearly articulate land professional roles and responsibilities including day-to-day actions, gender data collection and dissemination, training, advocacy, etc.

Empowering women

Grassroots women indicated that it is not just about allocating land to women, but also educating them so that they can be empowered. They claim that educated women can engage with policymakers to advocate for change and can claim their rights. They can also invest in their children and in their land, creating a multiplied effect on development.

Governments shall create policies and laws to promote women's formal education and ensure that women and girls do not drop out of school. Governments should also develop or encourage the development of programs to enhance women's competencies in various subjects, including land management and land restoration. Financial inclusion policies and strategies are needed to ensure women and other vulnerable groups can also access finance.

The private sector should develop approaches and solutions that help bridge the digital divide and support women's productive activities. This is valid for land related technology manufacturers that should consider the importance of securing land rights for all and make available affordable and fit-for-purpose technology.

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Financial institutions can set up micro-credit schemes and financial support through traditional, Digital financial services (DFS) and mobile money for women.

Critical actions moving forward:

3. **Ensure gender training is incorporated into land and surveying education.** FIG to support Member Associations to integrate gender training into tertiary-level surveying training. African Union should ensure regional integration of university programs with mandatory gender equality aspects in curricula. PAN African University to ensure more land-related courses mainstream gender throughout.
4. **Develop and track gender indicators** including the success of initiatives to attract women to land and surveying careers, and the reasons behind any attrition. FIG to play a role in monitoring and encouraging indicator tracking.
5. **Improve women's land and financial literacy** to encourage gender-justice in access, control and ownership of land. Professional bodies, NGOs and multilateral organizations can support the development and implementation of trainings, either as part of land reform projects or standalone. FIG and multilateral organizations can facilitate generic material to support local-level implementation.

Changing harmful practices

There is a need for a global mobilization to change harmful practices that impede women from achieving their full potential through roll-out campaigns advocating for WLRs at all levels, including within Government, civil society, grassroots level, and households.

Land institutions should adopt measures to prevent different actors from discriminating against women when accessing land or securing their rights. It is also essential to raise awareness and educate public officers, and to set a code of conduct for public servants and a reporting system against abuse of power and influence. Those who prevaricate the law shall be prosecuted.

Land professionals can engage in advocacy and sensitization programs with grassroots movements to educate women and men on the importance of equitable land rights. The African Regional Network (FIG-ARN) can promote the necessary transformation to ensure more women embrace the profession and female surveyors engage in sensitization activities. Initiatives such as the S4HL campaign are crucial to bringing in efforts from IGOs, NGOs, and CSOs, giving voice and agency to grassroots women, and promoting people-centered land governance.

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All stakeholders should make use of social media and of their own platforms to share information and connect women with other individuals and organizations working on similar issues.

Critical actions moving forward:

6. **Establish standardized code of conduct for public servants and reporting system** and/or good practices to facilitate national/sub-national agency adoption. FIG and partners can facilitate documentation and provide an avenue for dissemination.
7. **Facilitate land networks to improve advocacy reach** by linking professional, academic, and NGO/CSO actors. FIG's partnership with S4HL is one step in facilitating professional surveyors and organizations to connect with NGO and civil society actors working on the ground to support women's land rights. It is particularly important that achieving gender justice is recognized as not just advocacy, but fundamental to best practice.

Improving land tenure security

Governments and land institutions should promote initiatives for individualizing and formalizing land rights, adopting gender-sensitive approaches such as the Fit for Purpose Land Administration – FFPLA (Enemark et al., 2021), connecting people, processes, and technology (Balas et al., 2021). Governments must establish the purpose (for instance, adopting the AU target of 30% of land ownership to women) and implement reporting mechanisms to monitor these targets actively.

Land surveyors must consider the colossal gap in land registration and adopt the FFPLA approaches, including working with community paralegals and para-surveyors. Land surveyors can help build credible land cadastres to increase the security of tenure and ensure that systematic land registration programs are gender-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive.

Information technology professionals can develop innovative and affordable solutions that promote transparent and effective land administration based on gender-segregated data, using technology that allows communities to collect their data, supervised by land professionals.

All stakeholders shall facilitate a safe environment for women to participate, understand their rights, and communicate their concerns.

Civil society organizations, in particular, can help engage local communities, including the customary and traditional leaders, in promoting women's access to land and enhancing women's tenure security.

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Critical actions moving forward:

8. Continue to develop and implement good practice land administration to promote gender justice. All to continue to identify where initiatives have succeeded and failed in achieving gender justice. In particular, support shall be given to government agencies to continue to monitor the gender impacts of land reforms (especially in the case of development partner financing).
9. Continued support to tracking gender-justice related data to understand where and how successes are being achieved. FIG, S4HL, Prindex and partners to play a role in supporting data collection, collation, and interpretation.

Promoting research

Research institutions are critical to creating knowledge and spreading awareness on land governance issues, using accurate and up-to-date gender-segregated data to illustrate the impact of gender inequality in land access and land tenure security, as well as to propose practical approaches for changing discriminatory and harmful behaviors, including those existing in customary land governance systems.

Within the African continent, the PAN African University should bring in more professional courses with gender equality in mind, especially in land governance and land administration syllabus. Similarly, the African Union should ensure regional integration of university programs with mandatory gender equality aspects in curricula.

The AUC proposes additional research to reinforce the African "Women and Land Program" under the African Land Policy Center (ALPC) so that these efforts are not considered mere activism campaigns.

Critical actions moving forward:

- See (3) and (4) above.
- 10. Each country entering a systematic land registration program, including through campaigns such as S4HL, shall assess current WLRs situation prior to the start of the program to understand and contextualize the main barriers to gender equality in land access and tenure security.

Mobilizing resources

Governments must take WLRs seriously and dedicate efforts to promote gender-responsive land governance and land administration. This includes having specific budget lines to

~~promote gender equality and gender parity in public administration. Governments shall also~~
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invest in reforming land services so that these become accessible, affordable, effective, and equitable for all.

Development partners (DPs) shall include activities in their programs and projects to help implement and monitor the legal packages and reforms that are usually the only concern of their portfolio. DPs shall also channel funding for NGOs and CSOs promoting WLRs, especially those at the grassroots level.

Within the AU, there is a need for a strong partnership between the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), ALPC, and the African Union Land Agenda to fund research, advocacy, and capacity to implement the "Women and Land programme".

Critical actions moving forward:

11. UNECA, ALPC and African Union Land Agenda to partner and ensure ongoing capacity to implement the Women and Land programme to achieve gender justice in the land sector. This includes supporting countries transforming global policies into local policies and action plans.
12. Development partners to ensure that gender forms an integral part of all land programs and that support includes implementation of legal frameworks.

2.2. The Role of FIG, AUC, and S4HL in Advancing Women's Land Rights

Through its member associations and regional networks, FIG embraces the dissemination of good practices in land governance, land management, and land administration, including those that promote equitable land rights for all. In 2001, FIG launched its Publication 24, "Women's Access to Land – FIG Guidelines," which contains principles for equitable gender inclusion in land administration. This publication is under review by the WLRs working group created within Commission 7. The review is fundamental to adjust these guidelines to current global and regional contexts and to include field guides that are instrumental in the daily lives of surveyors and land professionals, including young surveyors, women in surveying, and land administration officials. Commission 7 also dedicates efforts to design approaches that are gender equitable when creating and updating land cadastres, such is the case of the FFPLA. Commission 2 is currently evaluating the inclusion of the SDGs in the professional education curricula, including SDG 5, gender equality. The ARN is organizing its 1st Women in the Surveyor Profession Meeting in the FIG working week in Ghana. The SDGs Task Force dedicates efforts to aligning FIG work with the 2030 agenda, ensuring that surveyors and land professionals contribute to the SDGs indicators.

The AUC has challenged the FIG ARN to actively participate in the "Women and Land Campaign" by promoting research on current gender inequality (policy, laws, practices) to establish a new baseline. Additionally, since there are cases of women in land managerial positions, the AUC proposed a study to verify the impact of these case studies in WLRs. ~~The AUC also favors disseminating the FIG good practices and guidelines to advance WLRs and~~ Singular Vision and Collective Action Are Required to Promote Women's Access to Land and Land Tenure Security (12483)

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suggested that all land-related courses in Pan-African universities shall include a subject containing them.

Recently, FIG has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the S4HL Campaign, partnering efforts to spread the campaign and build capacity at the grassroots level. The agreement reached at CLPA 2023 is that FIG ARN, through the national associations in countries where the campaign is active, will provide aid to conduct clinics that help create women's awareness of their land rights and give advice on specific concerns communities have. This includes involving women in surveying associations working with grassroots women's organizations.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In Africa, despite all the efforts, gender equality in land access and land tenure security is still far from reality, affecting primarily women, which represents a severe barrier to sustainable development.

Several experts from different backgrounds unanimously agreed with the proposal of a coordinated collective action based on a singular shared vision to create an inclusive and equitable environment for women to access and secure their land rights. This collective action "*takes a village*", working together to generate synergies that help create and uphold laws protecting WLRs and opportunities for women to engage in productive activities. It also requires a "revolution" of mindsets and behaviors, but one taken in many "*small and steady steps*" towards a people-centered land governance. Only through collective action based on a singular shared vision of gender equality in land access and land tenure security will Africa be able to fulfill existing agreements, frameworks, and conventions, resulting in greater social cohesion and stability.

The recommendations provided in this article are a result of the systematization of several discussions held during the CLPA 2023. There is a need to transform these recommendations into one or more actionable plans involving FIG and its member associations, the S4HL Campaign, and the AUC. This is especially relevant for FIG Commission 7 Working Group – Women's Land Rights and FIG SDGs Task Force, as part of the 4 year working plan with results to be presented at the FIG South Africa Congress in 2026.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article is part of Marisa Balas' PhD research related to the promotion of Women's Land Rights. It is also part of the engagement of the working group dedicated to Women's Land Rights within FIG, in which Marisa Balas is Chair and Kate Fairlie is Vice Chair. The authors have contributed to the article as follows: Conceptualization and Writing: MB; Review and Editing: MB. and KF; Review and Mentoring: RA and CL. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Marisa Balas is a PhD candidate at Universidade Aberta, in Lisbon, in the field of Social Sustainability and Development. She has been engaged in the land reform in Mozambique for the past 10 years, being responsible for designing and coordinating the implementation of the Land Information Administration System (LIMS/SiGIT). Marisa is active in the International Federation of Surveyors, chair of the Commission 7 Working Group on Women's Land Rights, and member of the SDGs Task Force.

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