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**Sustaining and Growing the Big Wins
of the 1995 World Conference on Women:
A Case for Advancing Women's Control
and Ownership of Land and Resource Rights**

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN-Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

1. Overview

“Ownership and control over assets that support income lie at the very heart of women’s economic empowerment and their ability to contribute to local, national, and global economies. For most women, the most valuable of these assets are the land and natural resources from which they earn a living, provide for their families, and invest in their communities. Evidence suggests that increasing women’s access to land and natural resources, and participation in agricultural value chains can have a positive impact on women’s agency, household productivity and income, responsible spending, and food security.”

USAID (2021). *Women’s Land Rights and Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) Overview*.

Women and girls who live off the land require guaranteed access, control and ownership of land and land-based assets as a pathway to diminish gender inequality and contribute and benefit meaningfully from development. Specifically, these are women and girls whose livelihoods depend on pastoralism, farming, fishing, hunting and gathering and small-scale trading. Agrifood systems are a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, 66 percent of women’s employment is in agrifood systems, compared with 60 percent of men’s. In southern Asia, women overwhelmingly work in agrifood systems (71 percent of women, versus 47 percent of men), although fewer women than men are in the labor force (FAO, 2023). Despite their major role in the agricultural sector, available data suggests that women represent less 15% of agricultural landholders globally (FAO, 2018).

For women and girls living in indigenous, rural and informal settlements, land is critical for responding to the climate crises and addressing economic injustices. It is a powerful tool to elevate women’s voice, agency and decision making in private and public spheres. Women farmers who have security of land tenure, are more likely to invest in sustainable agricultural practices that reduce losses and damage. Small scale women farmers often invest in labor intensive agroecological practices that protect our soils and environment, trading off the quick short-term returns for sustainability and the greater good. Regrettably, statistics by UN Environment show that over 80% of people displaced by impacts of climate change are women. Without tenure security, women are unlikely to recover their land and other immovable assets post disaster, which exacerbates land degradation. Women with secure land and resource rights have the ability to determine when, what and how to optimize quality and quantity production for household consumption and for their businesses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many women farmers lost access to and control of their land, as their spouses who had migrated to cities lost jobs and opportunities and returned home. Women’s access to land was curtailed or completely denied and in many cases these occurrences manifested violently. In Kenya, the devolved governance has provided for well-structured public participation in decision making on land matters through

the land control boards and community land management committees. Previously, only local title holders were eligible to join the land control boards. The practice discriminated against women, over 70% of whom do not own land (KDHS, 2022). The practice has since changed following lobbying and advocacy by organized groups to the ministry of lands on the frontline grassroots women. Land is not just a productive resource but also an important determinant for their heritage and identity without which they have no ability to bequeath similar heritage to the next generation, and especially girls.

2. The recognition of women land rights in Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform For Action (BPfA) has significant references linked to women's land and resource rights: paragraph 35, 51, 55, 58 (m) and (n), 60 (f), 61 (b), 165 (e), 166 (c), 256 (a) and (f). To accomplish these, the states committed to 'undertake legislative and administrative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property' (Paragraph 61b). Unfortunately, 30 years on, the gender gap in access, control and ownership of land remains large. Importantly, the BPfA did recognize that discriminatory social norms were a barrier to fulfilling women land rights and this remain a bottleneck to date. Many international frameworks that draw strength from or complement BPfA like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)/The Future of Cities have all recognized the value of addressing gender inequality in land governance as critical to sustainable development. Today, the world is confronted by compounding challenges including climate crises, war and conflicts, forced migrations, urban sprawl, social and economic inequalities, and land grabs. Unfortunately, this worsens the land tenure security of women and girls.

3. Recommendations

- (a) There is need to adequately resource the work and initiatives towards fulfilling secure land tenure for women with special attention to those that are led by women, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities living in poverty and in rural areas and informal settlements (e.g., Kilimanjaro Initiative, Stand For Her Land (S4HL) Campaign).
- (b) Governments should urgently allocate public budgets to close the gap between the progressive laws/policies on gender equitable land governance and the reality of women on the ground, including for eliminating all discriminatory norms and practices.
- (c) Halt all forms of resource extraction that contribute to the lack of and limited access to, control, and ownership of land and resource rights by women, especially from Indigenous and local communities.
- (d) Emerging feminist and gender equality initiatives including the feminist foreign policies need to integrate land governance and access to, control and ownership of land

as a critical issue for global trade, eliminating violence against women, food security and climate change.

- (e) There is need to invest in gender data and statistics that explore how securing women's land rights contributes to gender equality and sustainable development.
- (f) The UN-Women leadership on the full implementation of their 2024 Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy that underscores the importance of securing women's land right is essential to advancing the commitment of BPfA and the SDGs.