Advancing Women's Land Rights in Sub Saharan Africa

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SUMMARY

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is home to over one billion people, with land serving as the foundation of rural livelihoods, food security, and economic activity. Women account for more than half of the agricultural workforce and contribute substantially to GDP, yet they remain profoundly disadvantaged in accessing, owning, and controlling land. Only 13 percent of women report sole land ownership compared to 36 percent of men, reflecting deep and persistent gender inequalities. This paper examines the key barriers that undermine women's land rights in SSA, focusing on legal, institutional, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, and highlights emerging reforms and promising practices.

The analysis shows that while many African countries have adopted constitutions, land laws, and family codes affirming gender equality, plural legal systems frequently produce discriminatory outcomes. Women often remain unprotected, and customary practices continue to prioritize male heirs in inheritance. Institutional barriers further weaken women's tenure security: political will is inconsistent, women are underrepresented in land governance bodies, and weak local capacity at land institutions exacerbates corruption and elite capture. Socio-cultural norms reinforce patriarchal structures, with women frequently granted only derivative rights through fathers, husbands, or sons. Economic marginalization—lower education, limited access to credit, and exclusion from technology—further compounds these disadvantages, restricting women's ability to secure land or leverage it for empowerment.

Despite these challenges, positive reforms are underway. Countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Kenya, and Rwanda have introduced progressive family and inheritance laws, gender-sensitive land cadastres, and public sensitization campaigns to advocate for gender equality in land access and tenure security. Gender budgeting, legal literacy programs, and the deployment

of fit-for-purpose digital land information systems are improving transparency, reducing corruption, and enabling sex-disaggregated data for evidence-based policymaking. Civil society organizations and women's rights networks are playing a pivotal role in mobilizing communities, influencing national reforms, and ensuring women's voices are heard in land governance processes.

The paper argues that closing the gender gap in land rights is central to achieving sustainable development in SSA. Advancing women's land rights requires bridging statutory and customary frameworks, building institutional capacity, addressing discriminatory norms, and promoting economic empowerment. A gender-responsive land governance framework is therefore critical to ensuring that women in SSA not only gain equal rights on paper but also secure tenure in practice, thereby contributing to inclusive and sustainable growth across the region.