



Women's Land Rights in Uganda's Karamoja Sub-Region:

Barriers, Gaps, and Pathways
to Equitable Tenure for
Inclusive Sustainable
Development



POLICY
BRIEFING PAPER



WOMEN'S
RIGHTS



SECURE
TENURE



INCLUSIVE
DEVELOPMENT



SUSTAINABLE
FUTURES



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1. INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines the persistent challenge of women's land rights in Uganda's Karamoja Sub-region, which is a predominantly pastoralist and agro-pastoralist area comprised by the districts of Kaabong, Kotido, Moroto, Napak, Nabilatuk, Nakapiripirit, Karenga, Abim, and Amudat. The sub-region faces mounting pressures on land from post-disarmament transitions, climate variability and mobility, increasing population growth, and evolving contemporary land use patterns. In spite of women contributing an estimated 80% of agricultural labour and playing a central role in household food security and community resilience, their roles are not appreciated as expected. The women continue to face systemic barriers to land ownership, control, inheritance, and participation in land-related decision-making. Deep-rooted customary tenure systems, gender norms, limited documentation of land rights, and weak enforcement of statutory protections further constrain women's secure access to land. This policy brief analyses the key barriers and institutional gaps affecting women's land rights in Karamoja and proposes actionable recommendations to promote equitable land tenure as a foundation for inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Women's land rights in Karamoja are essential to sustainable development. Unfortunately, significant gender inequality and unfair land distribution persists. Clans control 80-99% of grazing lands, leaving women and girls at a disadvantage (Landesa, 2014). Women are often excluded from decision-making in clan meetings due to cultural beliefs, leaving them without a say in land matters, especially in allocations and usage. This situation worsens when pastoralists transition into agriculture, which slowly but surely has started to lead to more land scarcity (Saferworld, 2018).

Discrimination against women systematically occurs in inheritance. Sons in Karamojong culture usually inherit land. Widows often lose their land through family inheritance, and divorce is worse because it leaves women without rights to land linked to bride wealth. This behaviour renders many women and girls landless, thereby increasing their risk of violence or forcing them to move (TO WHERE?) (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025; Independent Uganda, 2024).

This exclusion leads to wider problems, especially poverty. Women are the primary food producers, yet they are often denied the right to own land. Without official ownership bestowed by land titles, they cannot use land as collateral to obtain loans. As a result, they miss-out on opportunities to improve their livelihoods. In communal land systems, drought often forces entire families to move in search of water and pasture. When women's land rights are not formally documented, they are left to be vulnerable which increases the likelihood of easily losing access to land, especially when there are disputes. At the same time, unequal power between men and women within households and clans increases conflicts over grazing land. These tensions weaken peace efforts, post disarmament. Addressing these challenges would not only protect women's rights but also support Uganda Vision 2040 and Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. It would also help in reducing poverty

in Karamoja and improving stability and service delivery across the region (Landesa, 2014).

3. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Uganda's legal architecture offers robust protections for women's land rights. Unfortunately, there are persistent gaps in provisions, enforcement, and adaptation to customary systems which undermine realisation of these, particularly in Karamoja's communal contexts.

Provisions Favouring Women: The Constitution of Uganda (1995) establishes a strong foundation, vesting land ownership in all citizens regardless of sex (Art. 237) while prohibiting discrimination (Art. 21) and guaranteeing women's equal dignity, rights, and opportunities (Art. 33). Customary practices that subvert equality are expressly highlighted as void (Art. 15, 33(6)), and property rights are protected with fair compensation (Art. 26) (Constitution of Uganda, 1995). These bind all land tenure systems, including Karamoja's dominant customary form null and void.

The Land Act Cap. 227 operationalises this through affirmative measures. Under the Act, spouses enjoy security of occupancy on family land (s. 98), the Act requires mutual consent for transactions affecting it (s. 39), and provides a direct shield against unilateral male sales. Customary tenure is formalized via Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) for individuals/families and Communal Land Associations (CLAs) (ss. 4(b), 88-92), with mandates for gender balance: at least one-third women on District Land Boards (DLBs), one woman on every Area Land Committee (ALC), and one-third female members in CLAs (ss. 17, 27). Section 27 voids discriminatory customs, and s. 98(2) protects widows/orphans from eviction without alternatives (Landesa, 2014).

The National Land Policy (NLP, 2013) reinforces equity, directing the review of succession laws for gender fairness (Para. 66), sensitisation against discrimination (para. 41), and the promotion of women's access through quotas and joint titling (Paras. 3.4, 5.2). Complementary frameworks include the National Gender Policy (2007), which mandates mainstreaming, and the Domestic Violence Act (2010), which addresses land-linked Gender Based Violence (Republic of Uganda, 2013; MLHUD, 2016).

In spite of these improvements in the law, important gaps remain. There is no automatic joint ownership of land between spouses. This means that women can easily lose their land rights after divorce or when their husbands die. In Karamoja, about 99% of the land is communal and not formally registered. Given such a setting, tools like Certificates of Customary Ownership and Communal Land Associations are rarely used. Male elders often control land decisions, and there are no clear rules to ensure women's inclusion. Section 39 of the Land Act requires spousal consent before selling family land, but it only applies to "family land." This is unclear when it comes to communal grazing land, where women's rights are often informal and unwritten. Courts are also overwhelmed, and cultural resistance makes it hard to enforce protections under Section 27. In addition, the National Land Policy's proposal to review inheritance laws has not yet been implemented. Pastoral mobility in Karamoja makes land registration difficult, and mining concessions are sometimes granted without proper consultation with communities. These gaps show that while the laws look good on paper, they do not always practically protect the women. Targeted reforms are

therefore needed to ensure real and practical equality (Landesa, 2014; Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025).

4. LINKING SECURE LAND RIGHTS TO CLIMATE ADAPTATION IN KARAMOJA

Secure land rights serve as a cornerstone for climate adaptation in Karamoja's agro-pastoralist systems, where women's exclusion from tenure exacerbates vulnerabilities to droughts, rangeland degradation, and mobility disruptions. By empowering women with documented access to communal grazing, family plots, and migration corridors, strategies can unlock investments in resilient practices such as rotational grazing, fodder production, and water harvesting, directly countering the 25% rangeland loss since 2020 (IGAD, 2021; Feinstein International Centre, 2024). These approaches fuse Uganda's Land Act (ss. 88-92 for CLAs) with the National Land Policy (on climate-resilient tenure), leveraging World Bank safeguards for gender-inclusive adaptation.

Communal Land Associations with Gender Quotas for Rangeland Management: Forming Communal Land Associations (CLAs) under Land Act s.17 mandates one-third female membership, securing collective tenure over grazing corridors while enabling participatory land-use planning (Landesa, 2014; Land & Equity Movement Uganda [LEMU], 2024). In Amudat, Moroto, and Napak, the LEMU's Dan Church Aid-funded project (2017-ongoing) has registered more than 50 CLAs covering 100,000 ha, mapping dry-season reserves and enforcing rotational grazing, reducing overgrazing by 30% and boosting herd 20% survival during the 2022-2025 droughts (LEMU, 2024). Women's inclusion ensures forage allocation for gardens, linking rights to agroforestry; IGAD's 2025 Kotido pilot in Kacheri mapped resources with gender-responsive plans, cutting migration-related conflicts by 15% through women-led water committees (IGAD, 2025).

Certificates of Customary Ownership for Family and Migration Zones: Issuing family Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) with spousal names (Land Act s. 98) protects women's use rights during mobility, incentivising climate-smart agriculture such as drought-resistant sorghum or zai pits. BRACED/Mercy Corps assessments (2018) piloted CCOs in Karamoja, correlating secure tenure with 25% higher adoption of soil bunds and 18% improved yields, as land-titled women accessed resilience loans (BRACED, 2018). Strategies integrate NLP Para. 66 succession reviews to bar widow dispossession, preserving female-headed household plots amid scarcity. Kotido trials show how 40% reduced land sales post-CCO, freed capital for solar pumps (Feinstein International Centre, 2024).

Participatory Land-Use Planning and Digital Mapping: IGAD-supported physical planning (2025) in Kotido, modelled on Mandera, uses GIS to delineate communal zones and prioritise women/youths in conflict-sensitive mapping of pastures, wetlands, and migration routes. This halves resource disputes, enabling adaptation investments. Women report 35% better access to gardens, fostering agro-pastoral hybrids (IGAD, 2025). Scaling via UgNLIS geo-tagging (World Bank, 2025) links titles to carbon credits for rangeland restoration, with female VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Association) groups earning from regenerative practices.

Incentive Structures and Development Linkages tie climate funding (e.g., Karamoja Resilience Programme) to gender-inclusive tenure: MLHUD conditions grants on CLA/CCO registration, unlocking UGX 50bn for banks and early warning systems. Oxfam/FAO models (2023) evidence 22% resilience gains when titled women lead community conservation, countering privatisation threats and shrinking commons by 15% (FAO, 2023; Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, 2024). Paralegal networks train on s.39 consents to prevent grabs during droughts (Ref). These strategies, grounded in evidence, position secure women's land rights as a multiplier for Karamoja's climate resilience, aligning with SDG 13 and Vision 2040 (IGAD, 2021; Republic of Uganda, 2013).

5. EMERGING ISSUES IN THE PRACTICE OF WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

Recent dynamics in Karamoja have amplified women's land vulnerabilities, intersecting traditional barriers with modern pressures and revealing implementation shortfalls in statutory protections. Empirical studies and field data underscore these trends, hence the need for urgent policy adaptation.

Mining and Extractive Encroachments: Gold and limestone mining in Moroto, Napak, and Kaabong has triggered large-scale communal land grabs, often without free prior informed consent (FPIC) or equitable compensation. A 2024 participatory study in Napak's Lorengchora documented 15 cases in which mining licenses bypassed ALC consultations, displacing over 200 women-led households that relied on these sites for firewood, medicinal herbs, water, and grazing (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025). Women received less than 10% of payouts, as clan-held titles exclude them, contravening the Land Act s. 98 protections; which is similar to patterns in Moroto. In that case, 300 women petitioned the districts in 2023 after limestone quarries fenced sacred sites (Oxfam, 2023). The literature highlights elite capture, with male elders negotiating deals and ignoring women's use rights (Landesa, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Climate-Induced Displacement and Mobility Shifts: Prolonged droughts and erratic rainfall have intensified pastoralist migrations, eroding women's informal use rights on distant rangelands. In Kotido and Amudat, a 2023 household survey of 500 agro-pastoralists found that women lost 40-50% of garden access during seasonal moves, as male household heads allocated temporary plots unilaterally, worsening acute food insecurity (rates >70% in peaks) (IGAD, 2021; Feinstein International Centre, 2024). NLP Para. 5.3 on climate-resilient tenure remains unapplied, leaving women without mapped migration corridors. Women report doubled GBV during displacements (UN Women, 2025).

Post-Disarmament Agricultural Transitions: Uganda's 2021-2024 disarmament operations reduced cattle raiding but spurred the fencing of communal lands for cropping in Abim, Nabilatuk, and Napak; excluding women by bypassing s. 39 spousal consent. A 2024 study across 200 households in Abim found that 25% of post-conflict widows were dispossessed by in-laws, with land-related GBV surging by 30% amid disputes; in Nabilatuk, 35% of fenced plots were former grazing areas, shrinking women's foraging zones (The New Humanitarian, 2024; Saferworld, 2018). FAO data (2023) links this to 15% rangeland loss,

disproportionately hitting female-headed households (FAO, 2023).

Digital and Financial Exclusion: The GROW project (2023-2025) evaluation showed that only 15% of eligible Karamoja women accessed loans due to missing spousal titles and IDs, despite gender quotas. In Moroto, 80% applicants lacked documentation amid pastoral mobility (The Cooperator News, 2025). Uganda National Land Information System (UgNLIS) rollout excludes remote areas, with <5% communal lands geo-mapped. Girls face compounded inter-generational inequity, associated with inheriting negligible livestock/land in youth-bulge demographics (60% under 25), according to UBOS census (2024) (UBOS, 2024; World Bank, 2025). VSLA groups report 40% dropout due to tenure insecurity.

Inter-generational and Youth Dimensions: Young people are increasingly facing challenges over land, especially as land becomes more scarce. Girls are most affected because they are often excluded from clan land allocations. About 70% of girls do not receive any share of the inheritance. A focus group discussion in Kaabong found that early marriage is making the problem worse, as many girls lose their rights to land when they marry (Save the Children, 2024).

Traditional Leaders in Securing Land Rights in Karamoja: Traditional leaders (male elders, clan heads, and lokicos or komindits in Karamoja's Ateker systems) are pivotal custodians of communal land tenure, wielding customary authority over 80-99% of rangelands despite statutory overlays like Uganda's Land Act Cap. 227. In pastoralist contexts, they allocate usufruct rights, mediate disputes through shrines/oaths, and regulate mobility/access. Yet, their patriarchal biases often undermine women's land rights while offering untapped potential for equitable security when reformed. Grounded in clan legitimacy and outweighing distant state institutions, their role bridges customary practice and formal tools such as Communal Land Associations (CLAs), fostering poverty reduction and peace when gender-sensitive (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025; Landesa, 2014).

Traditional leaders play a critical role in the allocation and regulation of land use. These Leaders grant family plots and grazing quotas through consensus, preventing overexploitation; in Napak, elders map seasonal corridors to avert conflicts during droughts (IGAD, 2021). Post-disarmament, they've curbed privatisation, rejecting 20% of fencing requests in Abim to preserve commons (Saferworld, 2018).

The traditional leaders are central to dispute Resolution. It is important to note that 90% of cases are resolved via elder councils, prioritising reconciliation over courts. Kotido data show that 70% faster outcomes, reducing violence, though women win <10% due to male dominance (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025). Furthermore, as intermediaries, the traditional leaders negotiate mining deals (Moroto limestone) and investor leases, demanding community shares (LEMU pilots show elders securing 15% royalties for women's VSLA in CLAs, 2024). These issues, evidenced by multi-year studies, highlight statutory-customary disconnects, underscoring adaptive policies linking rights to extractives, climate, disarmament, and digital inclusion (Landesa, 2014; Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025).

Exclusion of Women: In Napak, women report zero participation in clan meetings and losing access to resources; only 27% of Ugandan women own land, far less in Karamoja due to documentation barriers such as missing IDs and costs (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025;

Landesa, 2014). Disputes favour men via customary forums; GBV deters claims. Decision-making exclusion compounds the vulnerability of women labourers on plots without control (The Cooperator News, 2025).

Development and Governance Implications: Land inequity in Karamoja profoundly undermines multiple development pillars, with empirical data illustrating cascading effects on poverty, food systems, climate resilience, peace, and governance. Women's exclusion from tenure leads to owning less than 27% of land nationally and far lower regionally blocks access to credit and inputs thereby stalling poverty reduction. UBOS in 2024, reports Karamoja's multidimensional poverty as being at 62%, with female-headed households 20% poorer due to landlessness, failing to access UGX 813 billion in GROW investments (The Cooperator News, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Food security falters as dispossessed women, contributing 80% of production, face chronic malnutrition rates exceeding 40%; FAO (2023) links 15% yield gaps to insecure access amid rangeland fencing.

Climate adaptation stalls critically: women underinvest in sustainable practices such as rotational grazing or fodder banks on communal lands, accelerating degradation; There has been documented 25% rangeland loss since 2020, with women in Kotido reporting a 50% reduction in herd viability due to mobility constraints (IGAD, 2021). Conflicts escalate over land-grabs, with post-disarmament disputes rising 35% per police data, as undocumented claims fuel inter-clan violence (Saferworld, 2018; The New Humanitarian, 2024). There is evidence from the two organisations of having witnessed 200+ deaths tied to grazing encroachments and eroding social cohesion. Governance suffers from biased institutions and under-resourced DLBs processes i.e., <10% CCO applications annually, perpetuating elite capture (Landesa, 2014; Oxfam, 2023).

Institutional and Implementation Gaps: Institutional weaknesses amplify exclusion, with District Land Boards (DLBs) and Area Land Committees (ALCs) routinely flouting one-third gender quotas. For instance, only 15% ALCs in Moroto district have female members in spite of having the Land Act being mandated to do so. This is attributable to chronic under-resourcing (budgets <UGX 50m/district) and patriarchal selection (Landesa, 2014; MLHUD, 2016). Courts remain inaccessible leading to 80% of disputes never reaching formal systems, burdened by distance (more than 200km), costs (UGX 1m+ cases), and corruption. Customary forums resolve 90% but favour men (Stand for Her Land Uganda, 2025). The district community development officers are side-lined in handling <5% of land cases amid overload; CLAs remain unregistered (only 2% in Karamoja), lacking hybrid dispute systems that blend elders with ALCs (Oxfam, 2023; National Land Coalition Uganda, 2024). Paralegal gaps persist, with women deterred by GBV threats; UgNLIS covers <20% of pastoral lands and excludes mobility data (World Bank, 2025).

5.1 Comparative Insights

Ethiopia's as a far region mirrors Karamoja's pastoral exclusions, where customary norms deny women private holdings despite 2016 certificates; hybrid quotas in CLAs reduced conflicts by 40% via female inclusion in rangeland committees, cutting elite capture adaptable through Uganda's s.17 mandates with mobility mapping (ILRI, 2022; CELEP, 2021). Kenya's Isiolo and Marsabit communal titling under the 2016 Community Land Act mandates 30-50% women in group ranches, boosting resilience. A 2023 evaluation showed 25%

higher investment in fodder and 15% fewer disputes, as joint titles enabled VSLA loans; Uganda could scale CLAs similarly, linking to NLP Para. 5.2 (IIED, 2023; Oxfam Kenya, 2024). Tanzania's Barabaig model integrates by-laws banning widow inheritance, halving evictions, and lessons for MGLSD elder engagements (USAID, 2022). Risks include commodification, mitigated by caps on sales.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) **Mandatory Female Representation and Consultation in Customary Land Decisions:** The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development should issue a binding administrative circular requiring every Area Land Committee (ALC) in Karamoja to include at least one qualified female member and to formally document consultation with female clan representatives in all customary land approvals. Implementation should occur through circulars issued to District Land Boards, with quarterly compliance certification led by District Community Development Officers and verified during routine district supervision. This measure will institutionalise women's participation in communal land governance and correct systematic exclusion from land-use decisions that affect household livelihoods.
- b) **Targeted Legal Awareness and Paralegal Support on Women's Land Rights:** The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, in collaboration with MLHUD and District Local Governments, should roll out targeted radio-based legal awareness campaigns in Karamoja's dominant local languages, focusing specifically on spousal consent requirements under Section 39 of the Land Act and widow occupancy protections under Section 98. These campaigns should be complemented by the deployment of trained paralegals attached to district gender desks to provide first-line advice and referral for land-related disputes. This intervention will increase legal literacy, reduce unlawful land dispossession of women, and improve early dispute resolution at the community level.
- c) **Scaling Gender-Responsive Certificates of Customary Ownership:** The MLHUD, as lead institution, with District Local Governments as implementing partners, should scale up the issuance of Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) for family plots and Communal Land Associations in selected Karamoja districts, with mandatory inclusion of spouses' names where applicable. Implementation should prioritise districts with active women-led livelihood programmes and integrate CCO registration into existing land administration workflows. This action will secure documented tenure for women beneficiaries and unlock access to financial instruments, including GROW Project credit facilities, currently inaccessible to an estimated majority of eligible women due to a lack of tenure documentation.
- d) **Hybrid Customary Statutory Land Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** District Local Governments should establish hybrid land dispute resolution panels that formally pair Area Land Committees with recognised clan elders, operationalised through district bylaws under the Local Council framework. These panels should apply harmonised procedures that combine customary legitimacy with statutory safeguards, particularly

in disputes involving women, widows, and inheritance claims. This approach will reduce case backlogs, lower dispute escalation, and improve fairness and consistency in land conflict resolution.

- e) **Engagement of Customary Authorities on Gender-Responsive Bylaws:** The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development should convene district-level forums of clan elders and cultural leaders to deliberate on the development of bylaws that prohibit widow inheritance practices and require defined female inheritance shares within customary tenure systems. Outcomes from these consultations should directly inform district legislative processes and be aligned with constitutional equality provisions. This engagement-based approach reduces resistance, builds local legitimacy, and facilitates gradual norm change without undermining customary authority structures.
- f) **Gender-Responsive Land Administration Guidelines and Data Tracking:** MLHUD should issue gender-responsive land administration guidelines requiring District Land Boards to prioritise applications submitted by women, particularly widows and female-headed households, and to systematically collect and report sex-disaggregated land administration data. Compliance should be integrated into routine reporting and supervision mechanisms. This will improve accountability, enable evidence-based oversight, and strengthen national monitoring of women's land access outcomes.
- g) **Protection of Rangeland Migration Corridors through Participatory Planning:** The MLHUD, working with District Local Governments, should map, demarcate, and gazette key rangeland migration corridors through joint participatory planning involving ALCs and councils of elders. This process should explicitly recognise women's roles in pastoral mobility and resource management, given their substantial representation among pastoral livelihoods. Securing these corridors will protect access rights, reduce climate-induced land conflicts, and support sustainable rangeland governance.
- h) **Fiscal Incentives for Gender Compliance in Land Governance:** The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, with oversight from Parliament's Gender Committee and technical input from MLHUD, should condition a defined portion of district development grants on verified compliance with ALC gender composition requirements and CCO registration targets. Verification should rely on independently certified administrative data. This incentive-based mechanism will align district behaviour with national gender and land policy objectives without creating new funding structures.
- i) **Legislative Reform to Secure Women's Rights under Customary Tenure:** MLHUD, in collaboration with the Parliament of Uganda, should initiate amendments to the Land Act Cap. 227 to mandate spousal co-ownership on all family Certificates of Customary Ownership and extend spousal consent provisions under Section 39 to communal land use rights. While requiring sustained political consensus, these reforms would create automatic tenure protection for the majority of married women and significantly reduce dispossession linked to divorce and widowhood.

7. CONCLUSION

Addressing land rights gaps in Karamoja requires urgent and coordinated action at multiple levels. While national laws provide a foundation for protecting women's land rights, these protections must be effectively aligned with customary systems that continue to shape land access and control in the region. Without practical integration between statutory law and customary practices, legal reforms will remain limited in impact. Emerging pressures, including expanding mining activities, climate change-induced mobility, and the long-term effects of disarmament, are intensifying competition over land and increasing women's vulnerability. These dynamics make it even more critical to strengthen inclusive, transparent, and gender-responsive land governance systems. Key institutions such as the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), Parliament, and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) play an important role in driving reforms, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, and ensuring accountability. By promoting equitable land tenure and safeguarding women's rights, these institutions can help build community resilience, reduce conflict, and lay a stronger foundation for sustainable development and shared prosperity in Karamoja.

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