

ADVANCING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

POLICY BRIEF 2026/1

KEY POLICY ISSUE

Women's land rights are now firmly on the global development agenda, propelled into the spotlight by their explicit inclusion in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. **Despite this high-level visibility, we lack a clear picture of how much real, substantive progress has actually been achieved worldwide.**

KEY LESSONS

Based on experts' views, we found that:

- Progress has been modest, not transformative.
- Development efforts to advance women's land rights remain **merely gender sensitive, not truly gender transformative**—laying bare the flaws and limits of today's dominant policy and program approaches.
- Even with women's land rights written into the SDGs, the issue has not broken through in broader development debates and remains largely confined to its "usual" sectors, such as food and agriculture.
- There is **no single most influential actor** in advancing women's land rights.
- Funding for women's land rights is **inadequate** and **failing to reach the grassroots women** who need it most.
- There was **no clear consensus on where to invest**, though many leaned towards new campaigns, advocacy drives and stronger GEDSI integration. However, **measures to enhance women's awareness of their land rights** was considered to be both highly desirable and unequivocally feasible.
- Existing metrics for measuring progress in women's land rights may not truly capture real progress or insecurities.

Progress on women's land rights is slow, incremental, falling short of the transformative change many envisioned. Legal reforms, awareness-raising, and gender integration in land policies have yet to improve most women's daily lives or challenge entrenched norms and power structures that threaten their tenure security. There is an urgent need for bold, context-specific strategies that address legal, social, economic, and institutional barriers together. Future investments should support long-term norm change; channel more resources to grassroots women's organizations; strengthen data and monitoring; integrate women's land rights across sectors; and adopt truly transformative approaches that confront and dismantle unequal power relations.

POLICY PROBLEM

Over the past 10–15 years, women’s land rights have assumed increasing prominence within the international development agenda, particularly following their explicit incorporation into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A rapidly expanding body of evidence links secure land rights for women to a host of powerful development gains—from improved livelihoods to greater gender equality—yet our understanding of how much real, global progress has actually been achieved remains fragmentary.

This study confronts that gap head-on. Using a policy Delphi methodology, it draws on and distils expert insights to assess where the world stands on women’s land rights today, which implementation approaches dominate in practice, and what bold pathways could accelerate transformative change. Anchored around the adoption of the SDGs, it treats 2015 as a pivotal turning point, structuring the analysis around the periods before and after the launch of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to situate women’s land rights squarely as a central, strategic development intervention.

WHAT WE DID

We used a Policy Delphi approach¹ to canvas expert views and pinpoint where there was alignment—or sharp disagreement—on actions to advance women’s land rights. This survey-based method relies on an iterative, feedback-driven process that captures, refines, and compares expert perspectives using both qualitative insights and quantitative ratings.

Delphi stage	Key tasks	No. of questions	Survey period	Survey duration	No. of reminders	No. of invitations	No. of responses	Response rate
Questionnaire development	Literature review							
Expert selection	42 experts identified and invited							
Round 1	Survey	12	Sep-Nov 2024	8 weeks	2	42	24	57%
Round 2	Survey	12	Nov 2024 - Jan 2025	8 weeks	2	24	16	67%
Round 3	Survey	10	Feb-Apr 2025	8 weeks	2	24	18	75%

Figure 1. The policy Delphi process in this study.

After each round, areas of agreement and disagreement are distilled and sent back to the experts via a new questionnaire, which drills deeper into the most critical and contested issues. This cycle of feedback and re-assessment continues until a predefined level of consensus (51-80%²) is reached. The Delphi survey ran over six months, from November 2024 to April 2025, and comprised three rounds, each lasting eight weeks. The overall process and response rate are summarised in Figure 1.

Participant sample

42 experts (86% female and 14% male) were identified for the study through purposive (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, professional networks) and snowball

¹ de Loë, R. C., Melnychuk, N., Murray, D., & Plummer, R. (2016). Advancing the state of policy Delphi practice: A systematic review evaluating methodological evolution, innovation, and opportunities. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 104, 78–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2015.12.009>; Manley, R. A. (2013). The Policy Delphi: A Method for identifying intended and unintended consequences of educational policy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 11(6), 755–768. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2013.11.6.755>

² Donohoe, H. M., & Needham, R. D. (2009). Moving best practice forward: Delphi characteristics, advantages, potential problems, and solutions. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 11(5), 415–437. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.709>

sampling (experts asked to nominate other experts). Experts were practitioners, policymakers, academics and funders who have been part of international or national committees working on women's land rights or have contributed to publications on women's land rights. Experts represented a range of sectors, geographic experience and length of expertise (Figures 2-3). Of the 42 original panel members, only 10 experts participated in all three rounds of the survey. Overall, the sample satisfied the Delphi requirement of needing between 8-23 experts representing a range of expertise (geographic and domain).

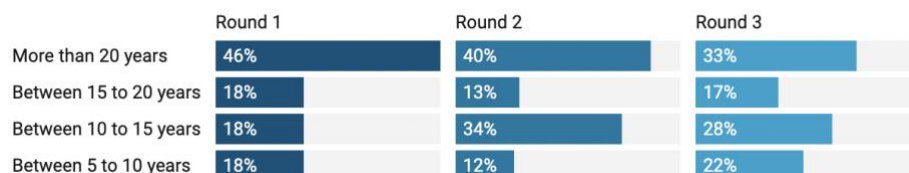


Figure 2. Expertise of participants per round (%), as indicated by the duration of experience working in/on women's land rights.

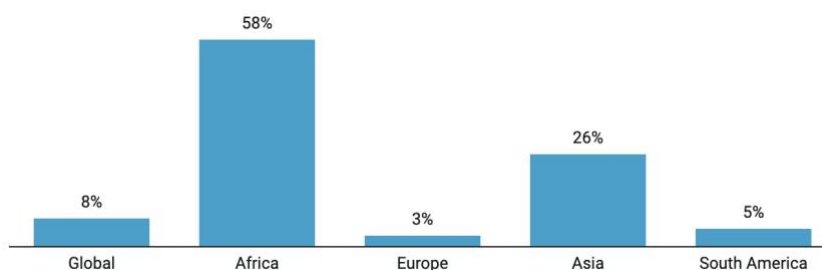


Figure 3. Participants' geographic expertise (%).

Data collection and analysis

The survey was conducted online in English. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse response rates (percentage), level of agreement (percentage); median, range and associated group rankings using the importance ratings; mean (SD) and their associated group rankings using the importance ratings. Qualitative data collected through free-text fields in the survey were analysed using syntax analysis³ and content analysis (to identify the key themes in the comments).

WHAT WE FOUND

Modest instead of transformative gains in women's land rights

While some progress has been made on women's land rights since the SDGs, experts agreed that the gains are modest, not transformative—slow, patchy, and far from complete. The clearest advances have been: (i) stronger legal recognition of women's land rights; (ii) greater awareness among women of the rights they hold; and (iii) the integration, recognition, and at least partial enforcement of women's land rights in key sectoral policies, including forestry, economic development, and agriculture. Yet, even with these steps forward, experts stressed that women's land rights remain poorly understood across much of the development community. 60% endorsed the follow-up

³ In syntax analysis, a high percentage of whole sentences generally indicates a solid level of engagement in the discussion and is used as a quality measure (Roßmann et al., 2018). In this study, 100% of responses were in whole sentences.



statement: “There is understanding of women’s land rights by the development community, but limited ability and/or interest to translate understanding into actions”.

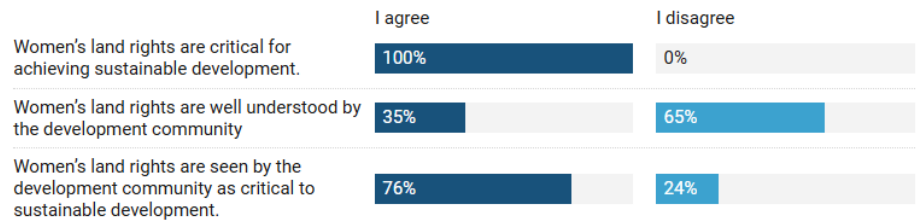


Figure 4. Perceptions around the link between women’s land rights and sustainable development.

Gender sensitive but not gender transformative development actions

A narrow majority of experts (59%) said that, when it comes to land tenure, most work on women’s land rights is merely gender sensitive: it acknowledges different needs and power dynamics, but rarely moves beyond tweaking program design to actually shifting those dynamics. Two core reasons emerged for the lack of “extreme” ratings—either discriminatory or truly transformative. First, there is weak political will and a tendency in the land tenure sector to oversimplify the deep power imbalances, structural barriers, and entrenched social norms that keep women’s land rights insecure. Second, short project cycles of just 1–5 years simply don’t allow enough time to meaningfully transform gender relations.

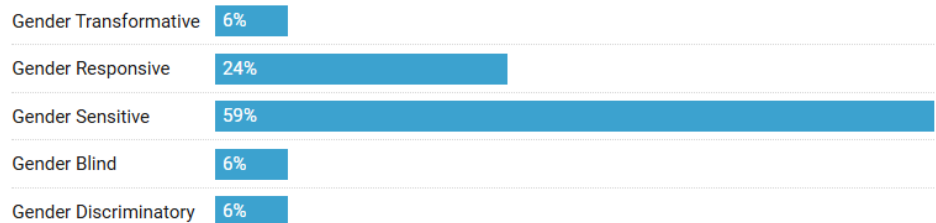


Figure 5. Perceived gender responsiveness of programs.

Inclusion of women’s land rights in the SDGs did not raise its profile in other development sectors

Experts felt that there was only modest overall integration of women’s land rights in other development sectors, but flagged notably stronger traction in areas where women’s land rights have long been on the agenda—food security, agricultural productivity, natural resource management, democracy and governance, and gender-based violence—as well as in emerging fronts like climate adaptation and resilience (Figure 6).

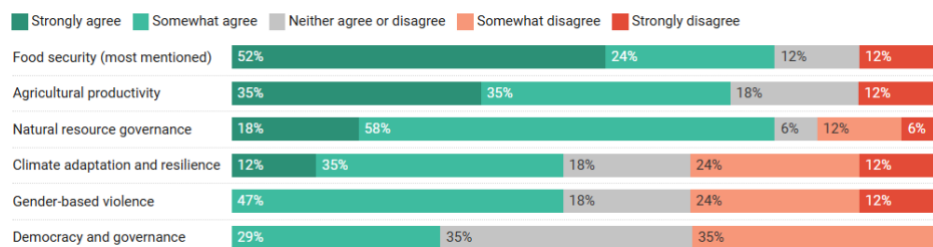


Figure 6. Top development areas where there is strongest integration of women’s land rights into actions – extent of experts’ agreement with areas.

There is no single, most influential actor in advancing women’s land rights

Experts disagreed on who really shapes women’s land rights (Figure 7). Yet many zeroed in on traditional leaders as prime candidates for norm-change efforts. At the same time, they overwhelmingly highlighted capacity development as a core strategy—particularly for subnational and local state authorities and for community-level women’s groups—and underscored that this must be backed by sustained, long-term funding for NGOs and civil society organisations.

Actors/Strategies	Advocacy	Capacity development	Information and awareness	Incentive structures	Pressure from above	Norm change interventions	Stronger regulations/rule	Long-term funding	Revised policies
National governments (e.g. Ministries of Land)	35%	6%	0%	12%	12%	6%	0%	6%	24%
Sub-national local authorities (state)	12%	41%	0%	18%	12%	0%	6%	0%	12%
Traditional leaders at the sub-national level	6%	12%	18%	0%	6%	53%	0%	0%	6%
Women’s groups at the community level	6%	41%	12%	0%	0%	0%	6%	29%	6%
International organisations	35%	6%	6%	6%	6%	0%	6%	24%	12%
Philanthropic actors	29%	0%	24%	0%	0%	0%	0%	35%	12%
NGOs and civil society organisations	18%	6%	12%	0%	0%	18%	0%	41%	6%
Academia/researchers	18%	6%	35%	0%	0%	0%	0%	35%	6%
Private sector	6%	6%	24%	35%	0%	0%	18%	6%	6%

Figure 7. Experts’ opinions on what strategies will likely be effective for engaging various actors (n=17).

Funding is inadequate and not reaching grassroots women

Over the past decade, women’s land rights have finally started to get more attention—but mostly from a small circle of donors and usually tucked inside larger programs. Experts warned this is nowhere near enough, especially when the goal is to drive coordinated action and dismantle deep-rooted social norms. Because funding is rarely decentralised, money tends to pool at the top: it goes first to governments and big organisations, then filters down through multiple intermediaries. Along the way, a large share is swallowed by higher-level actors and administrative costs, leaving women-led and community-based groups fighting over scraps.

At the same time, the lack of local, targeted initiatives means funding is skewed toward high-level activities—awareness campaigns, gender trainings, workshops, meetings, and research at global or national levels—rather than the on-the-ground efforts that actually put land and power into women’s hands.



WORLD
RESOURCES
INSTITUTE



Key investment priorities

Experts backed channelling investment into bold new campaigns and advocacy movements (45%) and into embedding GESDI at every level (43%). A clear third priority did not emerge, but many of the areas highlighted in Figure 8 were seen as tightly interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

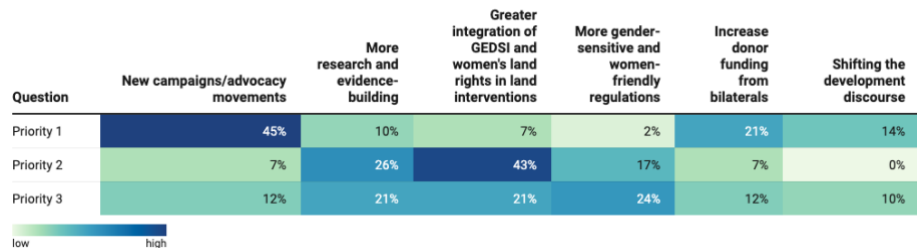


Figure 8. Top three priority areas for investment to maximise benefits for women's land rights.

Experts were asked where future investments should go to advance women's land rights, weighing both desirability and feasibility. Their responses (Figure 9) reveal a stark pattern: the only intervention seen as both highly desirable and clearly feasible is boosting women's awareness of their land rights. By contrast, efforts to shift cultural attitudes around women's land rights, although also rated highly desirable, were viewed as only possibly feasible. This gap highlights how experts anticipate serious obstacles to designing and implementing such norm-changing interventions—even when resources are not a constraint.

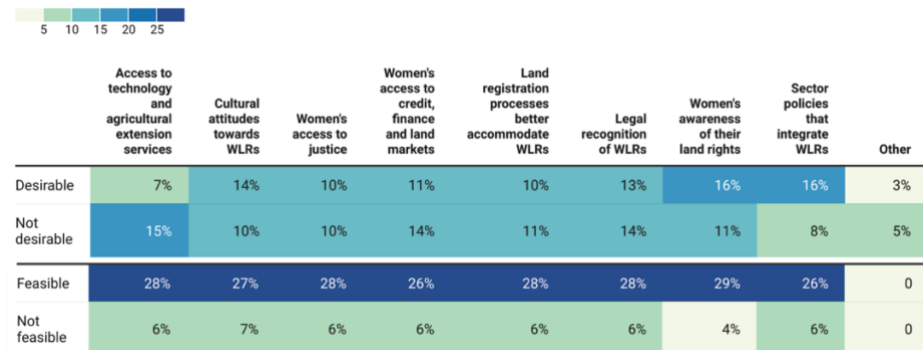


Figure 9. Summary of responses indicating desirability vs. feasibility of interventions.

Two core insights emerged from the qualitative data. First, no single policy tool can tackle the full range of challenges at stake. What is needed instead is a multidimensional, tightly integrated policy mix. Second, real progress demands policies that are rigorously tailored to context, because women's land rights are deeply woven into complex socio-cultural and spatial realities. A uniform, "one-size-fits-all" model simply does not work in the face of stark differences in cultural norms, legal regimes, and land tenure systems within and across communities and countries.

Existing metrics for measuring progress may not be adequate

Just over half of experts (53%) felt current progress indicators are adequate; the rest did not. Their proposed alternatives, shown in Figure 10, reveal clear fault lines. Some called for integrating perception-based data, arguing it can capture realities that standard

metrics miss. Others explicitly warned against relying on such measures, underscoring deep disagreement on their validity.

Many respondents pushed for indicators that reflect broader, gender-differentiated aspects of progress—for example, women’s representation and participation in key decision-making spaces, and the degree to which women’s land rights are recognized and respected in society. Additional proposals highlighted the need for indicators tailored specifically to customary land rights, to ensure these dimensions are no longer overlooked.

Indicator	Measurable?
Women’s perception of livelihood security prior to interventions, and the factors shaping that security (whether tenure security or other factors).	Yes
An indicator which does not measure perceptions. I realise this is there as a work around to accommodate customary land rights, but it is not sufficient. Measuring perceptions is only useful when a change has taken place or is taking place (as a proxy for an outcome perhaps). A new indicator would take account of several verifiers (documentation, formal and customary laws, and data on ownership and access) to determine tenure security.	Yes
Equal representation and participation in local land use planning and management.	Yes
Indicators should be assessed not only by sex and type of tenure but also consider other social differentiation factors: age, migration status, ethnicity.	Yes
Broad societal recognition of women’s rights (to land but also other civil rights).	No
Women engaged in leadership positions in land decision making (adjudication committees, land management, dispute resolution).	Yes
Level of capacity of institutions.	Yes
Programming to support an enabling environment.	Yes
Proportion of women with access to financial mechanisms/extension services to manage their land.	Yes
The extent to which customary systems provide tenure and livelihood security for women and their children/families.	Yes
Level of integration of customary land institutions in the national policy, institutional and regulatory framework.	Yes

Figure 10. Proposed additional metrics that are better placed to measure progress on WLRs more accurately.

SUMMARY

This policy Delphi study sharpens the picture of what has – and has not – changed for women’s land rights since the SDGs were adopted, and what it will take to keep pushing progress past 2030. It confirms a familiar pattern: slow, modest gains instead of the deep, transformative shifts needed in women’s control over land.

Despite new laws on paper, increased awareness among women of their rights, and efforts to “add gender” into land policies and programs, these changes have not translated into clear improvements in women’s daily lives or in the entrenched norms and power structures that undermine their tenure security. The findings point to an urgent need for multidimensional, context-specific strategies that tackle legal, social, economic, and institutional barriers together, rather than in isolation. Future investments must back long-term, norm-shifting work; channel resources to grassroots women’s organizations; strengthen data and monitoring systems; weave women’s land rights across all relevant sectors; and adopt explicitly transformative approaches that confront unequal power head-on. Although the expert sample had some geographic constraints, the study exposes major evidence gaps and pinpoints priority fronts for research, practice, advocacy, and policy reform.

The explicit recognition of women’s land rights in the SDGs has been a catalyst, but not a cure. Achieving truly transformative change will demand sustained, coordinated, and

politically savvy action that grapples with the full complexity of the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that shape women’s land tenure security.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all participants in this study for their invaluable input.

This study was supported by funding from the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, Grant No. 18642, “Securing Women’s Land Rights within the Collective”, awarded to and administered by the World Resources Institute’s Equity Centre and Land and Resource Rights Initiative. Research ethics was obtained from and governed by the University of Melbourne’s Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (2024-30811-58397-3).

Datawrapper was used to produce some figures in this report. Thanks also to Masoud Kamali who provided research assistance.

ATTRIBUTION

Ho, S., Scalise, E. and La Vina, C. (2026). Advancing Women’s Land Rights in the International Development Agenda. Policy Brief 2026/1, CSDILA, University of Melbourne and World Resources Institute.

