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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Exploring women’s land access and its impact on economic empowerment: challenges and pathways in west africa

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Abstract

Women’s access to arable land in West Africa remains a structural challenge shaped by deep-rooted traditional norms, gender-biased land tenure systems, and weak institutional mechanisms. This literature review examines how tradition continues to influence women’s land rights and explores the implications of restricted access for their economic empowerment and broader rural development goals. Methodologically, this review adopts a systematic literature review approach, guided by the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency and rigor. The CADIMA online tool was employed for article screening, definition of inclusion/exclusion criteria, and data extraction, while Zotero was used for reference management. A total of 4,109 documents were initially identified through comprehensive searches on Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, reports, and policy briefs published between 2000 and 2024. The following Boolean search string was applied across the databases: (“womenÖR ”gender”) AND (land accessÖR ll- and tenureÖR land rights”) AND (“West Africa”) AND (traditionÖR customary lawÖR inheritance”). After screening and full-text assessment, 142 documents were retained for final analysis. Findings reveal that, across much of West Africa, customary land tenure systems often based on lineage and male inheritance are the dominant mechanisms for land allocation and control. These traditions marginalise women regardless of existing statutory protections and are reinforced by social expectations and women’s underrepresentation in land governance. Consequently, women are frequently confined to temporary or degraded plots, limiting their economic autonomy and ability to invest in climate-resilient practices. Nonetheless, the review identifies emerging pathways for change, including participatory land certification, community dialogues, and legal literacy campaigns targeting both women and traditional leaders. These interventions demonstrate the value of context-sensitive governance models that integrate traditional norms with gender-equitable legal frameworks. Ultimately, securing women’s access to arable land in West Africa requires addressing entrenched cultural practices while promoting inclusive, gender-transformative land governance to foster sustainable and equitable rural development.

Keywords: Gender equality, land tenure, traditional norms, West Africa, women’s empowerment

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