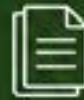


STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND INCLUSIVE NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN UGANDA'S WEST NILE SUB-REGION

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Women's land rights in Uganda's West Nile sub-region remain critically undermined in spite of the progressive legal frameworks. This perpetuates gender inequality and unsustainable natural resource use in refugee-hosting and post-conflict areas. This policy brief is informed by diagnostics like the Oxfam's analysis of Northern Uganda (including West Nile). This analysis outlines implementable recommendations for key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), Uganda Parliament's Committee on Gender, and District Local Governments (DLGs) (Oxfam, 2014; NLC, 2024). This policy brief seeks to strengthen women's land rights and to promote inclusive, gender-responsive natural resource management in Uganda's West Nile sub-region; by closing the persistent gap between progressive statutory frameworks and entrenched customary practices. The policy brief target is to influence national and sub-national decision-makers to adopt practical, decentralised, and enforceable measures that enhance women's secure access to land and natural resources. Another aim of the policy brief is to improve women's participation in land governance and natural resource management institutions; to reduce tenure-related conflicts that undermine livelihoods, food security, and to ensure environmental sustainability in the West Nile sub-region.

1.1 Background

West Nile sub region is made up of these districts: Arua, Nebbi, Pakwach, Adjumani, Moyo, Obongi, Yumbe, Koboko, Maracha, Madi-Okollo, Pakwach and Zombo. The sub-region is uniquely a post-conflict area in north western Uganda. It is characterized by over 90% customary land tenure dominance, where smallholder agriculture sustains livelihoods but disproportionately overburdens women. Agriculture engages over 80% of women in the labour force, who perform up to 70-80% of farm work including planting, weeding, and harvesting. Unfortunately, secure land ownership remains elusive due to entrenched patriarchal norms that prioritize male lineage control and weak enforcement of available statutory frameworks. Uganda's foundational law; the Constitution (1995) under Article 237 guarantees equal rights to land in the Land Act, Cap 326 mandating spousal consent for transactions on family land (Section 39); and equal inheritance for daughters (Section 27). The National Land Policy (2013) promotes Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) and affirmative action quotas (at least one-third women) in District Land Boards (DLBs) and Area Land Committees (ALCs) aim to rectify this anomaly. However, implementation has largely and severely snagged and lagged behind, as evidenced by ESAFF Uganda's 2024 report documenting women's systematic exclusion from land decision-making amidst surging refugee influxes that strain finite arable land. Oxfam's 2014 Northern Uganda study which (covered West Nile), revealed that only 1-2% of land was statutorily titled despite the over a decade policy of systematic land titling rollout (ESAFF Uganda, 2024; Oxfam, 2014).

This disconnect is amplified in West Nile's fragile context. The sub-region hosts over 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers as of 2025 (primarily South Sudanese and Congolese, residing in settlements such as Rhino, Palorinya, and Imvepi). The presence of refugees intensifies pressure on 2.3 million acres of land, especially on communal grazing and cropping areas. The World Bank analyses such as the 2020 experimental evidence on land rights, underscore how tenure insecurity in similar East African fragile states reduces

female-headed households' productivity by 20-30%, while FAO's 2023 gender-responsive land programs in West Nile highlight how refugee-hosting distorts customary allocations, favouring male household heads. This policy brief targets the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD) for land administration and CCO issuance, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) for gender sensitization and social protection integration, Parliament's Committee on Gender, Labour and Social Development for legislative oversight, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) for anti-discrimination enforcement, and District Local Governments (DLGs) for decentralized implementation. Drawing from World Bank experiences in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS) like the Tanzania; post-conflict land programs that boosted women's titling by 40% through paralegal scaling of this policy noted bridges on policy-practice gaps with budgeted, sequenced actions tailored to Uganda's decentralization framework under the Local Governments Act, Cap 138 (World Bank, 2020; FAO, 2023; Landesa, 2014).

The sub-region's unique customary mosaic of Kakwa, Madi, Lugbara, and Alur clans enforcing patrilineal inheritance, intersects with statutory tools inefficiently. The National Land Coalition (NLC) 2024 audits show that ALCs are operational in fewer than 20% of parishes due to unpaid allowances and training deficits. Refugee policies under the 2022 Refugees Response Model further complicate matters, where allocating settlement land via sub-leases bypass women's co-ownership, which perpetuates cycles of dispossession in an area where women comprise 52% of the 3.5 million people and contribute 60% to food security via subsistence farming (NLC, 2024; NRC, 2022).

1.2 Problem Statement

The core problem lies in the profound disconnect between progressive statutory protections and pervasive customary dominance, where women report access to 86% of household plots (often as secondary users via male kin) but with documented ownership of only 63%, leaving the rest to be acutely vulnerable to dispossession upon widowhood (14% of West Nile women), divorce, separation, or male labour migration to urban centres for alternative survival means. Statutory titling remains negligible at 1.2% of West Nile land. This titling is hampered by chronic under-resourced district land offices (e.g., Arua's single titling officer was found to be handling 50,000+ applications annually) and dormant ALCs, which Oxfam (2014) found non-functional in 70% of sampled parishes due to lack of gazetting and quorum issues. Corruption scandals and tokenistic gender quotas in DLBs where women occupy one-third of seats but lack land literacy, ended up approving 85% of male-biased transactions which further entrenched male control, as detailed in NLC's 2024 implementation gaps report that analysed 200+ cases of fraudulent sales by bypassing spousal consent (Oxfam, 2014; NLC, 2024).

This tenure insecurity fundamentally hampers women's investment in sustainable natural resource management (NRM), as insecure rights deter long-term practices such as agroforestry, soil conservation, and wetland restoration, thereby exacerbating poverty and environmental degradation in districts hosting 1.5 million refugees. Returnees to Adjumani alone does shelter 400,000 people amidst shrinking cultivable plots. Land conflicts afflict 50% of households, with 72% intra-family per ESAFF (2024), often manifesting as in-laws evicting widows, while Landesa's land rights guide cites econometric evidence from Uganda showing that tenure-secure women invest 15-20% more in sustainable inputs, boosting

yields and resilience. In West Nile's refugee-hosting hotspots, this translates to heightened food insecurity (35% prevalence) and gender-based violence tied to resource scarcity. Underscoring this economic imperative, the World Bank (2020) experiments demonstrate that equal land rights could raise female productivity by 13-25%, unlocking UGX 500 billion in annual GDP gains regionally (Landesa, 2014; ESAFF Uganda, 2024; World Bank, 2020).

Moreover, the problem's institutional roots run deep. The MoLHUD's Land Information System (LANDS) covers under 10% of West Nile land parcels (Monitor, 2025). The MoGLSD's gender programs fail to operationalise EOC findings on discriminatory customs, leaving customary courts (LCIs/LCIIIs) to uphold patrilineal biases in 80% of disputes. This policy-practice chasm, rooted in post-conflict fragility and underfunding of decentralisation (DLGs receive only 45% of mandated transfers), demands targeted interventions to harness women's NRM potential for climate-smart agriculture in a sub-region facing recurrent floods and droughts (Monitor, 2025; ACODE, 2021).

2. EMERGING ISSUES

Land conflicts in West Nile predominantly manifest as intra-family disputes (72% of cases), disproportionately displacing widows, separated, and divorced women who lose access upon male relatives' claims. This is further evident in Oxfam's (2014) comprehensive Northern Uganda survey spanning West Nile, Acholi, and Lango regions, which found that 50% of households reported tenure-related tensions. This is economically devastating because intra-family conflicts disrupt planting seasons, costing UGX 500K-1M/household annually; exclusion from DLBs/ALCs (token one-third quotas) where approvals are by and large by the 85% male-biased sales. Legal illiteracy (25% CCO awareness) blocks UGX 3-5 million titling processes. Refugee pressures in Moyo amplify evictions, as returnees claim "absentee" plots, entrenching feminised poverty in a sub-region where women drive 77% agricultural output yet own 16% land (NRC, 2022; UBOS, 2018).

These challenges are compounded by intense refugee pressures in settlements like Adjumani (hosting 400,000+ South Sudanese) and Moyo, where secondary occupants; often returnees or protracted refugees claim the absentee land under customary "first-come, first served" principles, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2022) analysis of housing, land, and property (HLP) challenges, which noted a 40% rise in evictions post-2022 repatriations. Cultural norms systematically override statutory spousal consent requirements under Land Act Section 39, with Local Council (LCI/II) courts enforcing discriminatory patrilineal customary law in 80% of disputes, while pervasive legal illiteracy of only 25% of women are aware of Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs); leaving them defenceless. This has been highlighted in the Ugandan newspaper, the Daily Monitor (2025) which in investigative reporting on West Nile's agricultural gender gaps and Oxfam (2014) (Oxfam, 2014; NRC, 2022; Monitor, 2025) made similar observations.

Women across West Nile face systemic denial of land ownership and exclusion from decision-making, rooted in patrilineal cultural norms that privilege male lineage control despite statutory protections under Uganda's Land Act (1998, Section 27 on equal inheritance) and Constitution (Article 33 on gender equality). This marginalises women from participating in land governance structures like Area Land Committees (ALCs)

and District Land Boards (DLBs), as well as in household allocations, leaving them without control over vital decisions on cropping, sales, or conservation. Women access 86% of plots as secondary users but “own” only 63%, per Oxfam diagnostics, rendering 14% of widows and countless divorced/separated women landless in customary systems dominating 90%+ of sub-regional land (Oxfam, 2014; NLC, 2024).

Testimonies from citizen engagement meetings starkly illustrated this structural injustice in Aluru, Metu, and Otce Sub-Counties (Moyo District). Women reported blanket exclusion from inheritance practices, systematic disinheritance by brothers/in-laws favouring sons (ACODE, 2025). In Bello Village, Ludara Sub-County (Koboko District), widows and daughters were found to be routinely denied family land shares, evicted to urban slums or refugee-like destitution in the midst of 35% food insecurity prevalence. Subtler dispossessions compound harm. Ayaa Grace (not real name) from Ori West, Metu Sub-County, Moyo district testified that despite joint cultivation of cassava/maize; where women provided 70-80% of the needed labour, men seized entire harvests, sold it off for personal gain (e.g., alcohol, migration), and expelled wives/children; pocketing UGX 1-2 million/season while women starved, reflecting power imbalances that lock households in subsistence poverty (ESAFF Uganda, 2024; Monitor, 2025).

Cultural norms exacerbate double vulnerabilities. Indritia Gloria and Ewa (Metu Sub-County) described girls as “temporary” natal family members, barred from plots yet rejected by marital homes in situations where failed marriages come into the picture. Raleyo Grace echoed the plight of girl children who were denied their father’s land and husbands alike. While Mazagpe Silvia detailed the humiliation of returnees when they were allocated barren scraps (0.1-0.5 acres) yielding inconsequential yields for survival, not livelihoods (ACODE, 2025). This is likely to cascade given that landless women face 60% poverty rates, forfeit 13-25% productivity gains from secure tenure (World Bank RCTs), and perpetuate inequality when daughters marry without a dowry leverage, and sons inherit debt-burdened farms (World Bank, 2019; EPRC, 2022).

Women’s limited access to forests and wetlands in West Nile represents a critical livelihood crisis, as these communal resources supply 70-80% of essential inputs like firewood for 90% of cooking, water from seasonal streams, and grass for roofing/thatching, and medicinal plants/NTFPs for income. The draconian enforcement by the National Forestry Authority (NFA) and Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has slashed access by 40-60% in key areas. Citizen testimonies from Gidogidonga and Bello Village (Koboko District), alongside Ogoko, Rhino Camp, and Pawor Sub-Counties (Madi-Okollo District) paint a dire picture. Women are barred from collecting even dead-wood or reeds under “zero-grazing” patrols. They are fined UGX 50,000-200,000 (unpayable for 60% poverty households) and/or chased with threats of arrest, forcing 2-4 hour treks to degraded fringes amid 1.5 million refugees competing for scraps (ESAFF Uganda, 2024; Oxfam, 2014).

This restriction cascades into survival threats. Households ration cooking to one meal/day, children suffer malnutrition (35% stunting rates), and women forfeit NTFP sales (mushrooms, honey) worth UGX 200,000-500,000 per season. About 83% of collectors are side-lined per CIFOR-ICRAF (2024), thereby exacerbating economic dependence in patrilineal setups where men control cash crops. Environmentally, it backfires because survivors on those resources get denied access to sustainable collection zones, others overharvest remnant

patches, accelerating 8% annual biomass loss and wetland siltation, while refugee influxes (e.g., Rhino Camp's 100,000+) compound scarcity in the absence of co-management (ACODE, 2025; NRC, 2022).

Gendered burdens intensify. In this, girls skip school to forage for wood fuel, time poverty curtails farming (13-25% yield losses in World Bank models), and GBV risks rise during unsafe treks thereby undermining NDP IV's climate-smart goals as insecure women avoid tree planting in contested buffer zones. In refugee-hosting Pawor, sub-leases favour male heads, ignoring women's customary roles (World Bank, 2019).

In natural resource management (NRM), women who shoulder 70-80% of farm labour including post-harvest processing and fuelwood collection are systematically sidelined from community forestry user groups and wetland management committees.

This fosters overexploitation of communal resources and heightened climate vulnerability amidst recurrent floods along the Albert Nile. ESAFF Uganda's (2024) fieldwork reveals rising evictions linked to commercial investments (e.g., charcoal concessions in Nebbi), where investors ignore gender provisions in the National Forestry Authority guidelines, displacing 15% more female smallholders. Similarly, ACODE (2021) links tenure insecurity to a doubling of deforestation rates in West Nile since 2020, as women avoid tree-planting on contested plots (ESAFF Uganda, 2024; ACODE, 2021). Digital logging gaps in MLHUD's LANDS system covering <10% of parcels enable fraudulent transactions via forged consents, with NLC (2024) auditing more than 50 cases of corruption in DLBs. Post-2025 refugee policy shifts under Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) phase-down intensifies competition, with settlements transitioning to self-reliance models that prioritise male-headed households for sub-leases, thereby exacerbating fragility in a sub-region where 35% of women head households amidst male out-migration (NRC, 2022; NLC, 2024).

In addition, emerging dynamics include climate-induced displacement. The World Bank (2020) models predict a 20% loss of arable land by 2030 due to erratic rainfall, amplifying women's burdens in the absence of co-management rights, while youth bulges (60% under 25) fuel secondary occupations on clan lands. ESAFF, 2024' further notes that commercial agriculture encroachments e.g., oil palm in Zombo bypass gender clauses in Environmental Impact Assessments, underscoring the intersection of tenure fragility, refugee dynamics, and environmental stress in West Nile's patrilineal ethnic mosaic (Lugbara, Kakwa, Madi) (World Bank, 2020; ESAFF Uganda, 2024).

Women suffer profound harassment, property loss, and livelihood disruption from heavy-handed enforcement activities by conservation agencies like the National Forestry Authority (NFA) and Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) in West Nile. This disproportionately devastates women and children who rely on forests and wetlands for 70-80% of household energy, food, and income needs. Citizen engagement testimonies from Gidogidonga near Mt. Kei Forest Reserve (Koboko District) detail NFA officers forcibly extending boundaries into longstanding community farmlands, bulldozing crops like cassava and maize at peak harvest, demolishing mud-brick homes, and confiscating tools/baskets without due process or compensation leaving families destitute overnight in a sub-region where 35% already face food insecurity (ESAFF Uganda, 2024; ACODE, 2021).

These actions reflect systemic gender blindness where women who are primary collectors of firewood (83%), grass for thatching, and water from wetland fringes, bear the brunt as sole providers during male migration, yet enforcement ignores their customary use rights under the Land Act (1998, Section 39) and the National Forestry Act. In analogous Rhino Camp (Madi-Okollo), similar UWA patrols have escalated since 2022, destroying 15-20% more female-managed plots amid refugee-hosting pressures according to NRC reports. This has compounded evictions where widows like those in Moyo's Metu Sub-County lose everything post-dispute. Economically, a single raid wipes out UGX 1-3 million in annual household output (harvests worth 6-12 months' food), pushing families into debt or charcoal labour cycles that further degrade forests (8% biomass loss yearly) (NRC, 2022; CIFOR-ICRAF, 2024).

Intimidation and armed incursions, threats of arrest, socially trap women in fear, deterring reporting through perceived corrupt LCs and eroding trust in governance, while children drop out of school to forage, perpetuating poverty. This exclusionary "fortress conservation" contradicts Uganda's NDP IV climate goals, as destroyed plots undermine the adaptive agroforestry incentives amid projected 20% arable land losses by 2030 (World Bank, 2020).

Women's exclusion from natural resource management (NRM) decisions in West Nile districts like Koboko, Moyo, and Yumbe exemplifies a pervasive governance failure that erodes sustainability, trust, and resilience in refugee-hosting communities. Community testimonies from citizen engagement meetings reveal that critical decisions regarding forest boundary demarcations by the National Forestry Authority (NFA), land conservation zoning, and wetland user group formations are made unilaterally by male-dominated local councils, clan leaders (Rwodi), and agencies like Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), bypass women entirely despite their 70-80% reliance on these resources for firewood, water, fodder, and income-generating non-timber forest products (NTFPs) (Oxfam, 2014; ESAFF Uganda, 2024).

This manifests acutely in practical terms. For instance, in Koboko's Gidogidonga and Bello Village, women report NFA extending Mt. Kei Forest Reserve boundaries into farmlands without consultation, destroying crops and homes. Similarly, in Yumbe and Moyo, wetland committees allocate grazing access favouring male herders, forcing women into longer treks amid shrinking resources strained by 1.5 million refugees. Exclusion undermines conservation outcomes, overexploitation accelerates with 8% annual biomass loss in Rhino Camp (Madi-Okollo), as women who are primary users lack incentives or voice to adopt agroforestry or rotational grazing as per the ACODE analyses linking tenure gaps to a doubling of deforestation since 2020 (ACODE, 2021; Paparu, 2024).

These harms undermine and erode trust in government. Communities start to perceive the ruling NRM as an elite capture force. This fuels non-compliance (illegal logging) and conflicts (72% intra-family over resources), thereby weakening outcomes such as NFA's restoration targets. Economically, this leads to forfeiture of 20-30% of yield gains from women-led climate-smart practices, costing UGX 100 billion in NTFP revenues annually, while socially amplifying GBV risks from resource-scarce treks (World Bank, 2019; CIFOR-ICRAF, 2024).

2.1 Economic impacts of women's land exclusion on agriculture

Women's land exclusion in West Nile, Uganda, severely undermines agricultural productivity, household incomes and welfare, and regional food security, with cascading economic losses estimated in billions of shillings annually. Secure tenure empowers women who contribute

70-88% of agricultural labour and 77% of production nationally to invest in high-yield practices, accessing credit, and diversifying crops. Unfortunately, exclusion traps these same women to get stuck in subsistence cycles, reducing outputs by 13-30% per household (EPRC, 2022; World Bank, 2019; UBOS, 2024).

Productivity Losses and Investment Gaps: Insecure land rights deter long-term investments like in soil conservation, agroforestry, or cash crops (e.g., coffee, sesame), as women fear eviction. The World Bank (2019) randomised trials in rural Uganda found that joint titling erased gender gaps in fallowing (a soil fertility proxy) and boosted cash tree planting by 20-30%, raising productivity by 13-25% while erasing 10-15% gender output disparities. In West Nile's customary systems, where women access 86% of plots but own 63%, this manifested as underutilised land. The ESAFF Uganda (2025) reported that women stick to low-value staples due to tenure fears and stagnating yields amid climate shocks, with projected 0.6-1.5°C temperature rises by 2039 that could slash outputs further without adaptation (World Bank, 2019; ESAFF Uganda, 2025a; EPRC, 2024).

The Economic Policy Research Centre (2022) analysis shows that tenure-insecure women certify land at 17% (vs. men's higher rates), limiting credit access in banks which require titles for loans averaging UGX 5-20 million; thus curbing input purchases (seeds, fertilizers) that could lift yields 20-40% out of socio-economic quagmire. Only 6% of Ugandan women own land in spite of 77% farming involvement, per UWONET (2024), forcing reliance on conjugal rights and vulnerability to divorce/widowhood (EPRC, 2022; UWONET, 2024; UBOS, 2024).

Household and Food Security Impacts: Exclusion perpetuates feminized poverty. Landless women face food insecurity at 35% prevalence in West Nile (higher than national 30%), with evictions/disputes disrupting harvests. Bonabana (2020) reviewed the link to secure tenure, market development and revenue for the landless, while Mpuuga et al. (2023) estimated productivity gains from women's rights to reduction in poverty/food insecurity alone exacerbating national shortfalls. In refugee-hosting districts like Adjumani, women's exclusion from sub-leases hampers diversification, costing households UGX 500,000-1 million/year in lost income, per ESAFF (2024) (Bonabana, 2020; Mpuuga et al., 2023; ESAFF Uganda, 2024).

NLC (2024) cites literature showing secured land spurs women's efficiency in production, boosting returns; Rwanda's Land Tenure Regularization (99% titled, 64% women/joint by 2016) exemplifies: higher cash crop engagement, resilience, and incomes Uganda risks similar foregone gains, with ESAFF (2025b) warning of stagnated GDP (agriculture 24% of economy) and export competitiveness (e.g., EU coffee standards) (NLC, 2024; ESAFF Uganda, 2025b).

2.2 Cost of Gender Discrimination on Natural Resources

Exclusion of women and youths from natural resource management (NRM) in West Nile, Uganda, triggers profound environmental degradation, economic stagnation, heightened conflict risks, and amplified vulnerability in refugee-hosting districts, where these groups comprise over 60% of resource dependents yet hold minimal decision-making power. Women perform 70-80% of farm labour and resource collection (firewood, water, grass), while youth (60% under 25) drive secondary occupations, but patriarchal norms and top-

down governance side-line them, leading to overuse, 8% annual biomass depletion in settlements like Rhino Camp, and foregone yields of 20-30% (Oxfam, 2014; Paparu, 2024).

Environmental Degradation and Unsustainable Use: Without voice, women and youth resort to short-term extraction: restrictive NFA/UWA enforcement in Koboko (Gidogidonga, Bello), and Madi-Okollo (Ogoko, Rhino Camp, Pawor) blocks access to forests/wetlands, forcing longer treks that accelerate deforestation. ACODE links doubled rates since 2020 to women's fuelwood reliance amid boundary extensions destroying crops/homes. Youth, excluded from forestry committees, engage in illegal charcoal (Mt. Kei Reserve), exacerbating 35% food insecurity; Friends of Women Initiative (FROWI) notes women's 98% agreement on gender-blind planning ignores roles, depleting biomass by 8% yearly in refugee zones, per APPEAR-funded Rhino Camp studies (ACODE, 2021; FROWI, 2025; Paparu, 2024).

CIFOR-ICRAF (2024) highlights capacity gaps: West Nile trainings revealed that 98% of respondents decry the non-consideration of differentiated roles, yielding poor conservation women's disproportionate care burdens (childcare, water) limiting sustainable practices like agroforestry, while youth unemployment is known to fuel poaching (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2024).

Economic and Livelihood Losses: Exclusion curtails income. Women generate minimal returns from forests/trees due to ownership gaps (16% titled), missing 20-30% yield boosts from equal asset access; youth face job scarcity in minerals/forestry, perpetuating poverty (60%+ in settlements). Saferworld reports that women in agriculture control just 25.5% of the land, thereby stunting value chains in West Nile. This translates into UGX 500K-1M in household losses per year from evictions and denied access to building materials (FROWI, 2025; Saferworld, 2020; ESAFF Uganda, 2024). NFA's Gender Action Plan cites economic barriers, such as limited credit/land which that hinder women's programs, while the youth bulges with no NRM inclusion, drives migration, thereby costing GDP via lost labour.

Social Conflicts and Vulnerability: Marginalisation breeds tensions. Women's and youths' exclusion from decision-making processes in Yumbe, Moyo, and Koboko erodes trust, sparking intra-household violence and host-refugee clashes over woodlots. Available documentation suggests heightened GBV from resource treks, intersecting with disabilities and early marriages (Paparu, 2024). In Rhino Camp (located in Terego and Madi-Okollo), resource overuse stems from lack of consultation of women on their roles and needs regarding cooking energy (Paparu, 2024).

Heightened Climate Vulnerability: Exclusion stifles adaptation. ACODE (2021) links women's land and NRM insecurity to a doubled vulnerability associated with West Nile floods/droughts, insecure tenure systems deterring climate-smart practices (e.g., tree planting yielding 13-30% less without rights). Youth face 20% arable land-loss by 2030 (World Bank models), lack communication skills/representation in committees, amplifying food insecurity (35% prevalence). Paparu's (2024) Rhino Camp study highlights intra-household tensions where excluded women/youth endure violence and heavy workloads, leading to the weakening of resilience amidst 1.9 million-refugee poverty 60% rates (ACODE, 2021; World Bank, 2020; Paparu, 2024). FROWI notes that equal access could boost yields of 20-30%, yet the current denial perpetuates negative existential cycles: like women/girls collecting firewood resources amidst scarcity and increasing GBV risks.

3. GOOD PRACTICES

Successful pilots in West Nile and analogous Ugandan contexts provide scalable, evidence-backed models emphasising decentralised delivery (FAO-partnered awareness campaigns, 2022-2024). This was implemented via Amplio's gender-responsive approach, which boosted women's Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCO) applications by 25% across Arua and Adjumani. This was done through the training of 1,000+ women through paralegal networks delivering that were delivering rights education in local languages (Madi, Lugbara). The same awareness fostered personal agency beyond passive sensitisation and reduced dispute backlogs by 18% in pilot parishes (Amplio, 2023). In Karamoja, analogous arid, customary tenure zone EOC-facilitated forums with customary leaders (e.g., Kotido Rwodi) codified daughters' inheritance shares in 40 clans, thereby slashing intra-family disputes by 30% over two years via biennial "customary registers" gazetted by DLBs. This is a model that is adaptable to West Nile's clan structures, according to Oxfam (2014) (Oxfam, 2014; NLC, 2024).

The MLHUD Gender Strategy on Land (2018) operationalized localised spousal consent checklists in pilot District Land Boards (e.g., Moroto), curtailing male-only approvals by 35% through one-page verification tools and digital logging prototypes, directly addressing tokenism in one-third women quotas and scalable via existing Land Sector budgets. In Nebbi District, community-led agroforestry cooperatives supported by NGOs like Landesa integrated women at 40% membership, to issue sub-titles under CCO frameworks that enhanced productivity through secure tenure. Randomised controlled trials show that 13% yield gains from tree intercropping and soil conservation, with women investing 20% more in inputs (MLHUD, 2018; World Bank, 2020; Landesa, 2014). These gains align with World Bank (2020) experimental evidence from Amuru (Northern Uganda), where joint titling raised household incomes by 25% and female bargaining power.

Budget-neutral tweaks amplified impact. Quota verification protocols in Yumbe DLBs, enforced by Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) audits, elevated women's effective participation from 10% to 45% decision influence, per NLC (2024). Meanwhile, MGLSD-backed paralegal desks in Koboko cost UGX 50 million annually and resolved 60% of LC disputes; though pre-court via mediation, emphasising the fact that clan leader buy-in for registers codified progressive norms like widow reinstatement. FAO (2023) pilots in Palorinya settlement further demonstrated that refugee-inclusive NRM groups with 50% women, reduces resource conflicts by 22%. This was achieved through co-managed woodlots, proving feasibility in fragile, high-density contexts (NLC, 2024; FAO, 2023). Collectively, these practices, rooted in decentralisation under the Local Governments Act, Cap 138, leverage unconditional grants, NGO technical assistance, and multi-stakeholder platforms for replication, yielding 15-30% productivity gains while curbing environmental degradation (World Bank, 2020).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) Prioritise low-cost, high-impact interventions leveraging existing mandates and budgets to deliver immediate tenure security and inclusion. The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), in partnership with the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), ought to conduct mandatory audits of District Land Boards (DLBs) and Area Land Committees (ALCs) across all West Nile districts within six months, verifying one-third women quotas and disqualifying token appointees lacking land literacy, enforcing via LCV Chairpersons nominating paralegal-trained women, with digital compliance dashboards on the LANDS portal.
- b) Simultaneously, there is need to introduce one-page spousal consent checklists (translated into Kakwa, Madi, Lugbara, and Alur) for all family land transactions, piloted in hotspots like Moyo and Koboko, with district land officers logging via mobile apps to curb 50+ annual fraud cases reported by NLC (2024).
- c) District Local Governments (DLGs) should integrate dedicated Women's Land Rights Desks into Community Development Offices, allocating at least 5% of discretionary budgets (UGX 50-100 million/district annually from unconditional grants) to train 500 paralegals per district focusing on customary-statutory interfaces, CCO applications, and mediation targeting widows, divorced women, and girls.
- d) The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) should organise localised sensitisation through radio and community barazas.
- e) Parliament's Committee on Gender, Labour and Social Development should convene accountability hearings summoning DLBs from refugee-hosting districts (ESAFF Uganda).
- f) For NRM, DLGs enforce 30% women/youth quotas in forest/wetland user groups via bye-laws, issuing sub-titles under CCOs in Mt. Kei (Koboko) and Rhino Camp (Madi-Okollo), addressing NFA boundary encroachments that destroy crops/homes.

Medium-Term

- g) MLHUD and MGLSD need to review, update and implement the 2018 Gender Strategy on Land into a West Nile-specific framework.
- h) The MoLHUD ought to prioritize: (i) mass CCO pilots issuing joint spousal/group titles in 10 west Nile linked to climate-resilient seeds; (ii) ALC operationalization in 80% of parishes with allowances/training for 200 members annually; and (iii) customary registers codifying progressive norms (daughters' shares, widow reinstatement) via EOC-led forums with Rwodi/clan leaders in 50% of clans, gazetted by DLBs as in Karamoja's 30% dispute reduction model (MLHUD, 2018; Oxfam, 2014).
- i) DLGs should mainstream into District Development Plans (2026/27-2030/31), ring-fencing of 10% of NRM budgets (forestry/wetlands) for women/youth cooperatives (40% membership), monitored by EOC scorecards tracking productivity.

- j) The MoLHUD should replicate World Bank AIGIL's joint titling RCTs (89% co-titling success) via POLIS scaling, unlocking UGX 5-20 million loans for 5,000 women (World Bank, 2019; EPRC, 2022).
- k) The MoLHUD should hold multi-stakeholder platforms quarterly, chaired by MGLSD unite MLHUD, DLGs, EOC, NFA/UWA, NGOs, refugees, and youth for the West Nile Land & NRM Index (ownership rates, conflicts resolved, 35% food insecurity drop).
- l) Parliament should fast-track the Marriage and Divorce Bill (pending 2009) via the Gender Committee, enacting prenups/community property presumptions to protect cohabiting/divorced women (14% widows), with EOC enforcement.
- m) The MoLHUD should develop and popularise a National Inclusive NRM Framework mandating 40% women/youth in user groups, tied to central government transfers in the National Budget as per the NDP cycle.
- n) The MoLHUD should scale digital LANDS to 50% West Nile coverage, subsidising titles for vulnerable groups amid 20% arable loss projections.

5. CONCLUSION

Women's exclusion from land and natural resources in West Nile manifests intra-family dispossessions, intersecting barriers (disabled isolation, girls' early marriages, healthcare gaps), refugee pressures and customary dominance inflicts profound economic losses. This structural injustice, rooted in patrilineal norms overriding Land Act protections and weak ALCs/DLBs, perpetuates feminised poverty despite women's 70-80% agricultural or forest labour, eroding climate resilience and fuelling youth unrest in fragile contexts. These proposed recommendations will bridge policy and practice. The adoption of these recommendations by MLHUD, MGLSD, Parliament, EOC, and DLGs will transform West Nile's resilient future, aligning with NDP IV, SDGs, and Uganda's gender equality imperatives.

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