

Women and rural landscape: the importance of securing women's collective rights to land

In the rural areas of lower- and middle-income countries, the territories of Indigenous Peoples and local communities have long been under siege. 2.5 billion people—more than half of them women—use and rely on these territories, which cover over 50 percent of the world's land.

Communities rely on their customary lands for their sustenance, livelihoods, and culture, but often do not have legal rights to the territories they have long called home. “Land grabs” for large-scale plantations, logging, mining, and infrastructure such as dams and wind turbines can further entrench rural poverty and [even result in violence](#), particularly against women. These developments also [push newly landless farmers to migrate](#) in search of arable lands, further exacerbating the pressure on scarce resources.

The “[Power and Potential](#)” report makes clear that community and indigenous women who lead their households depend on their land and its productive assets for their sustenance and livelihoods—yet their tenure rights are particularly vulnerable. Even when communities are consulted on economic developments, women are often excluded from the decision-making processes that affect them.

Secure, legally recognized rights for communities contribute to international goals on climate, poverty reduction, and peace, but the benefits of community forest ownership can only be realized if women's rights within communities are recognized. Strong tenure rights for community women also contribute to economic stability, food security, health, and education outcomes for women and their families. **Yet “[Power and Potential](#)” finds that most governments have failed in their obligation to protect indigenous and rural women's tenure rights.**

This is an increasingly dire problem, as [a growing number of households in rural areas around the world are led by women](#). The percentage of female-led households is growing in half of the world's 15 largest countries by population, including India, Pakistan, and Nigeria. As women increasingly manage their households as well as the lands and resources their communities depend on, it becomes even more important to strengthen women's property rights, especially in indigenous and local communities.

[According to the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#), more than one quarter of rural households in sub-Saharan Africa are led by women.

- In seven Eastern and Southern African countries—Eritrea, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Rwanda, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe—more than one third of rural households are led by women.
- In South Africa, one out of every two rural households is led by women.
- In Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the proportion is 25 percent or more, and increasing.
- This proportion is also growing (but not yet 25 percent) in Benin, Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.
- In Comoros, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Mauritania, and Mozambique, the proportion is not growing, but greater than 25 percent.

The number of households led by women is also rising in other low and middle-income countries:

- In South America, the numbers are growing in Peru (16.3 percent) and Colombia (21.7 percent).
- In Asia, the numbers are growing in the Philippines (14.4 percent), Vietnam (22.4 percent), Bangladesh (13.2 percent), India (14.9 percent), Nepal (24 percent), and Pakistan (11 percent).

Urban-rural migration

While disease and conflict contribute to the rise of women-led rural households, perhaps the biggest driver of this trend is migration from rural areas to urban regions. This trend began in the late 20th century and continues today.

Until recently, this migration [has predominantly been led by men](#), with [women left behind](#) to work the farms and care for their families in a wide variety of countries, including Mexico, Pakistan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia. In China, individuals who have migrated from rural areas to cities [have left behind](#) an estimated 47 million wives, 61 million children, and 45 million elderly relatives.

Several studies in East Africa found that migration directly impacted the gender balance of local communities:

- In a study on rural-urban migration in Kenya, most migrants were between the ages of 18-40, and [men outnumbered women by 2 to 1](#).
- In Southern Ethiopia, [rural-urban migration](#) for men was twice that for women.

[In much of Asia](#), however, the urban migration patterns have become more equal. In India, men and women migrate at about equal proportions. In Thailand, slightly more men migrate to the cities than women. In Indonesia and Vietnam, women migrate to cities at a slightly higher rate.

In Latin America, most of the population—[more than 80 percent](#)—is already living in urban areas. For Indigenous Peoples and local communities, the [population that has migrated to cities](#) are primarily wage earners who send their earning back home to households where older women care for their grandchildren and other relatives.

Rural population dynamics underline the importance of women's land rights

As women are increasingly managers of their customary lands and resources around the world, their rights become even more essential for economic development, food security, and poverty reduction in these regions. The FAO, for example, found that improving women's property rights in Burkina Faso by itself would [increase total household agricultural production by about 6 percent](#), simply by reallocating resources (fertilizer and labor) from men to women.

As the number of rural households led by women continues to surge in many countries around the world, policymakers seeking to address poverty and human rights should prioritize securing the rights of rural women to their lands and resources.