

Women's Land Rights and Food Sovereignty in Nepal

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This thematic brief aims to highlight the interconnected challenges of women's land rights, food security, and climate justice in Nepal. It provides evidence and policy analysis to support civil society organizations, peasant movements, and policy advocates in strengthening campaigns for equitable land access, food sovereignty, and the realization of the right to food.

Introduction

Ending hunger is a global priority, and Nepal has committed to achieving Zero Hunger by 2030 in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite notable progress in improving food security and nutrition over recent decades, persistent challenges remain particularly for marginalized groups, landless households, and women farmers.

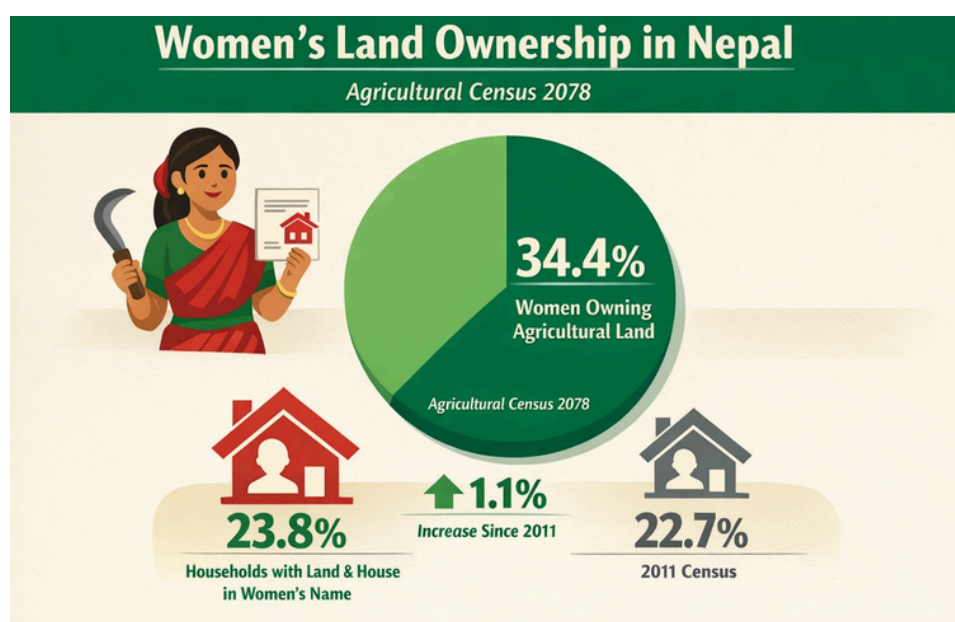


Nepal's 2015 Constitution enshrines the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty under Article 36, alongside related rights such as dignity, housing, employment, equality, social justice, and access to clean water and sanitation. In response, the government enacted the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act (2075/2018), which obligates all tiers of government to respect, protect, and fulfill food rights, ensuring access without discrimination and safeguarding vulnerable communities from hunger. Complementary legislation, including the Right to Housing Act (2018), Right to Employment Act, Social Security Act, and amendments to the Land Act (1964) and Civil Code provisions on inheritance and women's property rights, strengthens the legal framework to protect women's access to land and food. However, implementation gaps, weak enforcement mechanisms, and gender-insensitive approaches remain significant challenges¹. Furthermore, economic inequalities such as limited access to credit, inputs, markets, and secure tenure compound these challenges, leaving women unable to fully benefit from agricultural production or achieve economic stability. These realities underscore the urgent need for civil society advocacy and policy action to ensure that constitutional and legal promises translate into tangible progress toward hunger, promoting gender equality, advancing economic justice, and achieving equitable development.

¹ Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperative (2022), Land and Property Rights in Nepal: Annual Report

Women's Land Rights and Barriers

Agricultural Census 2078 has shown that the share of women who own agricultural land in Nepal is 34.4 percent. According to the census, 23.8 percent of households have their land and house in women's name, a 1.1 percent increase compared to 2011. However, despite these legal entitlements, women's land rights are often denied social legitimacy, constrained by patriarchal norms, discriminatory inheritance practices, and entrenched cultural attitudes².



Women face numerous institutional and legal barriers when attempting to secure land registration and ownership certificates. The process is often slow, costly, and bureaucratically complex, requiring multiple documents and the involvement of paralegal agents (lekhandas) who charge additional fees. For women, these challenges are intensified by limited familiarity with administrative procedures, frequent harassment during land-related transactions, and the perception that land registration is a "male domain." Many women lack essential documents such as citizenship certificates or identification photographs, while distance to land offices, inadequate transportation, and household responsibilities further restrict their mobility. Additionally, limited awareness of land transfer procedures and high female illiteracy severely undermine women's ability to exercise their legal rights³, directly affecting their economic empowerment. Without secure land tenure, women have limited access to credit, loans, and investment in farming or small enterprises, reinforcing cycles of poverty and economic dependency.

² Government of Nepal. Agricultural Census 2078.

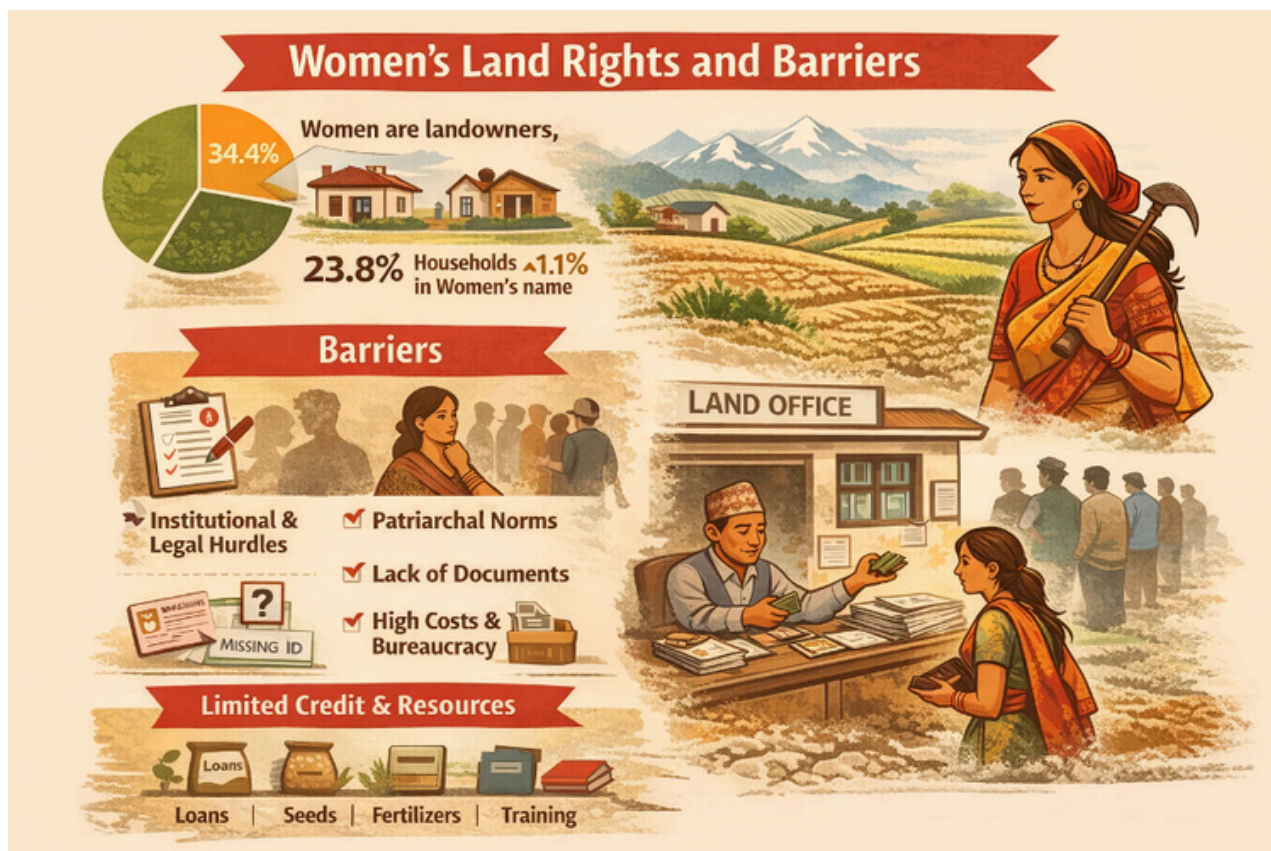
³ Women's Land Rights Research, UN Women Nepal (2021).

Women farmers in Nepal also face systemic barriers in fully participating in and benefiting from agriculture. Access to credit is limited because land ownership, often required as collateral, is disproportionately held by men. Without secure tenure, women struggle to obtain loans for investment in farming or small enterprises. Similarly, opportunities for training and extension services are frequently directed toward male farmers, leaving women with less exposure to modern techniques, market information, and climate-resilient practices.

Access to agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, irrigation facilities, and technology is constrained by financial limitations and institutional biases. Male-dominated cooperatives and distribution systems often overlook women's needs, reinforcing dependency and inequality.

Overall, gendered inequalities in access to resources and authority systematically weaken women's ability to secure sustainable livelihoods, limiting their meaningful contribution to food security and sovereignty in Nepal⁴.

Strengthening women's land rights is therefore not only a matter of gender equality but also a critical pathway to achieving food security, strengthening rural livelihoods, and advancing food sovereignty in Nepal.



⁴ FAO, Gender and Food Security in Nepal (2022).

Policy and Legal Context

Nepal has established several legal and policy provisions aimed at strengthening women's land and property rights. The Land Act 1964, including its recent amendments in 2021, recognizes women's rights to inherit land and promotes joint land ownership between spouses as a way to increase women's formal access to property⁵. In addition, the National Civil Code 2017, which replaced the earlier Muluki Ain, includes provisions guaranteeing daughters equal inheritance rights and broader protections for women's property ownership⁶. Despite these progressive legal reforms, the practical implementation of these rights remains limited due to weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of institutional capacity, and persistent patriarchal norms that discourage women from claiming land. Government initiatives such as Joint Land Ownership (JLO) campaigns, which provide incentives such as reduced land registration fees for property registered in women's names, have contributed to gradual improvements in women's ownership statistics⁷. However, these programs often lack sustained outreach, monitoring, and support at the local level. Many women remain unaware of their legal rights or face administrative barriers when attempting to register land. Furthermore, access to legal aid, grievance mechanisms, and community-level dispute resolution systems remains limited, particularly in rural areas. As a result, women who attempt to claim inheritance or property rights may face social pressure, family disputes, or bureaucratic obstacles without adequate institutional support, leaving their land and economic rights vulnerable despite existing legal protections.

Addressing these gaps requires stronger institutional commitment, legal awareness programs, and gender-responsive implementation at federal, provincial, and local government levels.

⁵ Government of Nepal. Land Act 1964 and Amendments 2021.

⁶ Government of Nepal. National Civil Code 2017.

⁷ Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation. Joint Land Ownership Incentive Policy and Land Registration Guidelines

Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Right to Food

Women in Nepal play a central role in food production and household nutrition. Their decisions on food preparation and household diets directly influence dietary diversity and nutritional outcomes. Studies show that women's involvement in food shopping and preparation improves household diet diversity and nutritional quality, yet their contributions are often undervalued in policies and programs⁸.

The Nepal Living Standards Survey (2022-23) highlights evolving food consumption patterns and persistent inequities across regions and social groups⁹. Food insecurity arises from structural weaknesses, geographic disparities, and social exclusion. Nearly half of Nepal's districts cannot meet basic food needs, leaving millions malnourished. Rural, hilly, and mountainous regions are more vulnerable than the Terai. Marginalized groups, particularly Dalit, Indigenous, Muslim, and women, experience disproportionately high levels of food insecurity, with Dalit women among the most affected. Regional disparities show Karnali Province as the most food insecure, followed by Madhesh, Gandaki, and Sudurpachhim. Natural disasters, low agricultural productivity, and climate shocks such as floods and droughts intensify these vulnerabilities, while the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened household food insufficiency.

Secure land tenure is vital for food security and economic stability, enabling investment and resilience, while unequal land distribution perpetuates poverty and limits empowerment. The Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act (2075) provides Nepal with a legal framework to guarantee food as a fundamental right. However, implementation gaps remain, particularly in ensuring inclusion of peasants, landless households, Dalits, Indigenous peoples, and women, who are most vulnerable to food insecurity¹⁰. Equity concerns persist in the distribution of food and access to productive resources, and weak accountability mechanisms limit policy effectiveness. These challenges highlight the structural nature of food insecurity in Nepal, where unequal access to land, markets, and productive resources intersects with social discrimination, geographic isolation, and climate vulnerability.

⁸ Government of Nepal. Nepal Living Standards Survey 2022-23.

⁹ National Statistics Office. (2024). Nepal Living Standards Survey IV, 2022/23: Statistical report. Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Government of Nepal.

¹⁰ Government of Nepal. Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act 2075 (2018).

Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Right to Food



Food Sovereignty: Food sovereignty emphasizes local communities' control over land, seeds, production systems, and food governance. It challenges industrialized models that have fueled hunger, inequality, and ecological harm, while promoting agroecology, biodiversity, and cultural food traditions. Food sovereignty affirms food as a human right rather than a commodity, calling for democratic participation in policy-making and regeneration of localized, sustainable food systems¹¹.

¹¹Via Campesina & Nepal Agroecology Network, Food Sovereignty Reports (2022).

Climate Justice: Climate change threatens food systems and livelihoods. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, droughts, floods, and landslides disrupt crop cycles and yields. Maize in the Terai has declined, while rice and wheat show mixed results. Soil degradation and ecosystem instability further weaken agricultural resilience, leaving farmers vulnerable. Women, particularly smallholder farmers in remote areas, face compounded vulnerabilities due to unequal access to land, credit, and decision-making power. Climate change also increases household burdens for women, including food provision, water collection, and caregiving, limiting their ability to adopt adaptive farming strategies¹².

Women’s leadership in climate-smart practices such as agroforestry, organic farming, water conservation, cooperatives, seed banks, and microfinance enhances resilience, reduces environmental impact and strengthens rural economies. Education and digital tools further empower women with technical skills, making them central to creating equitable, resilient, and climate-smart food systems.



¹² Climate Change Impact on Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture, 2021.

Civil Society Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks:** Ensure full enforcement of the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act, Land Act amendments, and Civil Code provisions for women's inheritance and joint land ownership, with dedicated oversight mechanisms for economic equity.
2. **Implement Gender-Responsive Programs:** Guarantee women's access to agricultural credit, inputs, training, extension services, and climate-adaptation measures, prioritizing marginalized communities to advance economic justice.
3. **Promote Agroecology and Community Food Systems:** Support seed banks, cooperative farming, biodiversity, and local governance structures that enhance food sovereignty and resilience.
4. **Enhance Climate-Resilient Practices:** Integrate women-led climate-smart agriculture, soil conservation, and water management into national adaptation plans.
5. **Mobilize Civil Society Campaigns:** Build networks to advocate for equitable land access, food security, and climate justice, linking local action to regional and global campaigns.
6. **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability:** Establish transparent mechanisms to monitor implementation of food rights, land ownership reforms, and climate adaptation programs, ensuring civil society oversight and participatory decision-making that advances economic justice.
7. **Expand and institutionalize Joint Land Ownership (JLO) initiatives, legal aid services, and awareness campaigns** to ensure that women particularly from marginalized communities can effectively claim, register, and exercise their land and inheritance rights.

Women's land rights, food security, and climate justice are deeply interconnected in Nepal's rural economy. Despite progressive constitutional and legal commitments, structural inequalities continue to limit women's access to land, resources, and decision-making power. Ensuring equitable land rights for women is essential not only for gender justice but also for strengthening food sovereignty, improving rural livelihoods, and building climate-resilient agricultural systems. Sustained policy commitment, grassroots mobilization, and coordinated civil society advocacy will be critical to transform legal rights into lived realities for women farmers and marginalized communities across Nepal.