

Strengthening Land Tenure Security and Women's Land Rights in Nigeria

Policy Analysis, Implementation Gaps, and Gender-Transformative Pathways

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Key Messages

- ▶ Nigeria's land governance system has not delivered secure, affordable, and inclusive land documentation for most citizens, which is needed for agricultural productivity, food security, housing, climate resilience, peacebuilding, and women's economic empowerment. Despite wide consensus on the need for land reform, the pluralistic system and the constitutionally entrenched Land Use Act have limited advances.
- ▶ Formal land registration remains limited in Nigeria, with more than 90% of land estimated to be unregistered. Customary, Islamic, and informal institutions continue to govern many land relations, but women and pastoralists frequently face weaker or inadequately documented rights.
- ▶ The lack of systematic gender- and conflict-sensitive recognition and tracking of land and resource rights at the national level contributes to the gender gap and to violent farmer–herder conflicts.
- ▶ A significant opportunity for reform has been opened by national attention to Land4Growth, state-level digitization, experience with systematic land titling and registration (SLTR), Supreme Court rulings on women's inheritance, and growing evidence on gender-transformative land programming.
- ▶ A high-impact land reform program in Nigeria should invest not only in surveying, digitization, and title issuance, but also address the legal overlap of statutory and customary tenure, the gendered effects of inheritance and marital property norms, practical barriers that reduce women's land rights, and the rights of pastoral communities.

Context and Background

Nigeria contains multiple ecological zones, from arid and semi-arid northern landscapes to humid coastal and delta systems in the south (World Bank Group, 2020), which support crop farming, livestock production, forests, wetlands, urbanization, mining, and infrastructure development. However, this physical and socioeconomic diversity across an area of almost 924,000 sq. km means that land governance problems manifest differently across regions. In Nigeria's North and Middle Belt regions, pastoral mobility, stock routes, access to water, and farmer–herder relations are common issues. In southern and urbanizing states, inheritance disputes, informal peri-urban expansion, the power of land-owning families, and land market informality are prominent issues. In the Niger Delta and coastal zones, land governance intersects with ecological vulnerability, oil-related displacement, and environmental degradation.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, and population growth is increasing pressure on land and relatedly, on water, food systems, and housing. Land has multiple functions, as a source of social identity, traditions, political belonging, family continuity, and income and economic power. For many rural households, land is the main productive asset, while for urban and peri-urban households it is a store of wealth, a location for housing, and potential collateral for loans.

Agriculture is central to Nigeria's non-oil economy. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing account for roughly one-fifth of GDP, and about one-third of employment is in agriculture, with much production still undertaken by smallholder households (World Bank, 2025a, 2025b). The productivity of this sector depends on secure access to land, predictable rules for land use, and the ability of landholders to invest in soil conservation, irrigation, tree crops, agroforestry, and climate-smart production. Where farmers, pastoralists, women, youth, tenants, and secondary rights holders perceive their rights as insecure, they are less likely to make long-term investments or may be excluded from credit, extension services, and government support. Weak land governance therefore has direct consequences for livelihoods, investment, food security, social cohesion, and gender equality. Secondary rights to land are rights or interests held by persons other than the principal holder of a statutory or customary right of occupancy, including customary tenancy and occupation rights, family and community allotment rights, leases and subleases, mortgages and other security interests, easements and rights of way, succession and beneficial interests, and legally protectable interests in improvements, trees and crops.

The disconnect between the potential of Nigeria's land assets and their actual use is stark. More than 90 percent of land is unregistered and untitled, although traded regularly, and Nigeria has an estimated US\$300 billion in “dead capital,” that is land/assets that cannot be legally traded or used as collateral because of lack of documentation (FMHUD, 2024, 2025). These figures are estimates, rather than parcel-by-parcel cadastral statistics, but they capture a real structural problem: land transactions are active, yet documentation, mapping, registration, and lawful transfer processes are slower than the demands from the rights seeking public.

Policy and Legal Framework

Constitutional guarantees and the special status of the Land Use Act

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides the overarching legal framework for property and equality. It guarantees the right of every citizen to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria, and protects against compulsory acquisition without prompt payment of compensa-

tion and access to a court or tribunal for determining interest and compensation. It also prohibits discrimination on the basis of community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion, or political opinion. These provisions provide an important constitutional foundation for women's land rights, protection against discriminatory customary practices, and accountability in compulsory acquisition.

However, the Constitution also entrenches the 1978 Land Use Act, the country's primary land statute, establishing it as one of a small group of statutes that can only be altered by constitutional amendment procedure, including approval in the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly. As a result of the high approval thresholds required to amend or repeal the Act, repeated reform efforts have failed, despite wide consensus that Nigeria's land administration system requires modernization.

The Land Use Act: Statutory land control and implementation gaps

The Land Use Act vests all land in the state governors, except that vested in the Federal Government or its agencies, to be held in trust and administered for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians. This framework abolished formal recognition of the old freehold system and replaced it with rights of occupancy. Urban land is controlled by the state governors, advised by a Land Use and Allocation Committee, while non-urban land is controlled by local governments, likewise advised by Land Allocation Advisory Committees. Governors grant statutory rights of occupancy, and local governments grant customary rights of occupancy for agricultural, residential, and related purposes. A Land Use and Allocation Committee is a statutory state-level body established under section 2 of the Land Use Act 1978 to advise the Governor on the management of urban land and the resettlement of persons affected by revocation, and to determine disputes regarding compensation for improvements on land. Its membership and overall size are determined by the Governor, but it must include at least two appropriately qualified and experienced estate surveyors or land officers and one legal practitioner.

The Act is formally gender-neutral because it speaks in terms of "persons" and "holders" rather than men and women. In practice, however, gender-neutral legal language has not produced gender-equal outcomes. The Act does not require spousal consent, joint registration, disclosure of marital status, mandatory recording of women's rights, or collection of sex-disaggregated land administration data. It also leaves substantial space for customary allocation systems to determine who is recognized as a landholder in rural areas. Where customary norms allocate land through male lineage heads, male household heads, or male heirs, women's interests are often treated as derivative, temporary, or secondary, even where women cultivate, manage, inherit, occupy, or invest in the land.

The Act requires consent for alienation of customary and statutory rights of occupancy. In theory, the consent requirement protects the public interest and ensures orderly land transfers. In practice, it often contributes to delays, high costs, informality, and discretionary decision-making. The Act also allows for revocation of land rights for overriding public interest, with compensation largely focused on unexhausted improvements, such as buildings or crops, rather than the full market value of land. This approach weakens tenure security for communities whose social, ancestral, and livelihood interests in land exceed the value of improvements visible at the moment of acquisition.

Pastoralism, grazing reserves, stock routes, and livestock transformation policy

Nigeria's rural and agricultural economy remains substantial. Approximately 36% of the population—around 86 million people—was estimated to reside in rural areas in 2025, while agriculture accounted for approximately 34% of total employment. The 2022 National Agricultural Sample Census identified about 40.2 million agricultural households. Following the rebasing of Nigeria's national accounts, agriculture

contributed approximately 27.55% of real GDP in 2025. These figures underline the importance of rural land administration and the formal recognition of customary, family, communal and derivative land rights.

Pastoral communities are a major actor in Nigeria's land governance landscape, yet the country does not have a comprehensive federal pastoral land tenure law that clearly defines the rights held by pastoralists, pastoral women, and host farming communities. Instead, pastoral land governance is shaped by a combination of the Land Use Act, older grazing reserve and stock route frameworks, state laws and policies, livestock development programs, anti-open grazing laws in some states, customary arrangements, and security responses to farmer–herder conflict.

The Nigerian population Census 2025 estimates that the number of Fulani pastoralists involved in cattle and dairy production is approximately 12 million, equivalent to about 5% of Nigeria's current estimated population. Most pastoralists are based in the northern savannah and semi-arid zones, although seasonal and long-term movements extend through the Middle Belt and into parts of southern Nigeria. Although pastoralism is not separately measured in the national accounts, the Nigeria L-PRES program states that the wider livestock subsector is estimated to contribute approximately 2–4% of national GDP. Pastoral and agro-pastoral producers nevertheless account for a dominant share of domestic cattle and traditional milk production.

Historically, grazing reserves and stock routes were designed as land allocation tools for migrant pastoralists, intended to reduce conflict and enhance pastoral productivity. The grazing reserve framework introduced in the former Northern Region in 1965 sought to designate land for pastoral use, prevent agricultural encroachment, and secure corridors of passage connecting grazing reserves, watering points, and cross-border routes. A 2025 study from the Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria program (SPRING) documents that widespread encroachment, cultivation, and politically driven allocation have made many reserves and routes ineffective (Blench, 2025).

The rights protected by the grazing reserve framework are primarily rights of access, use, movement, and grazing, not private ownership rights. In practical terms, the rights include access to designated grazing reserves; use of stock routes and corridors; access to water points and dry-season grazing areas; protection against encroachment that blocks livestock mobility; and the possibility of settlement or ranching under state-supervised arrangements. These rights matter because unclear or blocked pastoral routes can escalate ordinary land-use competition into violent conflict. They also matter for women in particular, because pastoral women's livelihoods often depend on milk production and processing, small ruminants, fuelwood, water access, local trade, and social networks that are affected by mobility limitations and displacement.

The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) 2019–2028 seeks to transform the livestock sector through ranching, productivity improvements, peacebuilding, value addition, and mitigation of farmer–herder conflict. The 2023 Nigeria Livestock Roadmap describes the NLTP as a strategic intervention to improve livestock productivity and reduce the conflict between settled farmers and pastoralists through the establishment of ranches (FMAFS, 2023). These plans shift the policy debate from criminalizing mobility toward investing in secure livestock production systems. However, on their own, they do not establish a detailed and enforceable pastoral land rights regime, nor do they provide a legal guarantee that pastoral women will be documented as rights holders, consulted in land-use planning, or compensated where access to common resources is lost.

For a gender-transformative land reform agenda, the policy implication is clear: any land documentation or land-use planning intervention in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas should identify and record not only

household settlement plots but also seasonal grazing, water, corridor, market, milk-processing, and common resource access rights, and should avoid treating pastoral land use as empty land, state land, or merely a security problem. It should include women pastoralists and women farmers in consultation, conflict analysis, and dispute resolution.

Women's inheritance and constitutional equality: Supreme Court decisions

Nigeria's legal framework provides important entry points for strengthening women's land rights. In the 2014 *Ukeje v. Ukeje* case, the Supreme Court held that Igbo customary rules excluding female children from inheriting their father's property are discriminatory and void because they violate constitutional equality. This case is directly relevant to daughters, especially those whose claims are contested because of customary rules or circumstances of birth (ESCR-Net, 2018a).

In *Anekwe v. Nweke*, also in 2014, the Supreme Court condemned customary practices that dispossess widows or deny them rights in their deceased husband's property, especially where the widow is vulnerable because she has no male child. The case underscores that customary law remains valid only to the extent that it is not repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience and is consistent with constitutional rights (ESCR-Net, 2018b). Together, the *Ukeje* and *Anekwe* cases create a legal basis for challenging customs that deny women rights to inherit, possess, or remain on family land. They do not automatically reform every family or community practice; their transformative potential depends on legal literacy, administrative protocols, accessible dispute resolution, and land registration forms that ask the correct questions about daughters, widows, spouses, co-holders, and occupants.

Table 1: Summary of legal and policy instruments relevant to women's land rights and pastoral land governance in Nigeria

Instrument / policy	Core land-rights relevance	Gender and pastoral relevance
Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999	Protects property acquisition, compensation for compulsory acquisition, and non-discrimination; entrenches the 1978 Land Use Act.	Provides the constitutional basis for women to challenge discriminatory customary inheritance and land allocation practices.
Land Use Act, 1978	Vests state land in governors; creates statutory and customary rights of occupancy; requires consent for alienation; permits revocation for overriding public interest.	Gender-neutral in text but weak on implementation safeguards: no mandatory joint titling, no spousal disclosure, no sex-disaggregated registry data, and no explicit protection of women's secondary or derivative rights.
Nigeria's pastoral land-use arrangements are governed by a fragmented combination of state grazing-reserve laws derived from the Northern Nigeria Grazing Reserves Law No. 4 of 1965, the Land Use Act 1978, state Gazette notices and survey instruments establishing particular reserves or livestock routes, and national livestock policies such as the National Livestock Transformation Plan 2019–2028. Cross-border livestock movement is additionally regulated by ECOWAS Decision A/DEC.5/10/98 and Regulation C/REG.3/01/03.	There is no single federal statute establishing a uniform nationwide network of grazing reserves and stock routes; the legal status of each reserve or route must be verified under the law and land records of the state in which it is situated. These frameworks designate pastoral use areas and movement corridors; protect access to grazing and water; reduce farmer–herder conflicts where properly demarcated and enforced.	Provides use and access protections for pastoral livelihoods, but do not create women-specific land rights or systematic documentation of pastoral women's resource claims.
National Livestock Transformation Plan 2019–2028	Promotes livestock productivity, ranching, value chains, and conflict mitigation.	Creates a policy entry point for gender-responsive pastoral land-use planning but requires stronger safeguards to include pastoral women and women farmers in consultation, benefit-sharing, and compensation.

Source: Authors' compilation.

Institutional Framework for Land Governance

Nigeria's land governance architecture is fragmented across federal, state, local government, and customary authorities. The Federal Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is responsible for federal land policy coordination, federal land management, housing policy, and recent national land registration initiatives such as Land4Growth. The Presidential Technical Committee on Land Reform, inaugurated by President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua on 2 April 2009, was established to support land reform, cadastral mapping, and the development of a national land depository, although its transformation into a permanent National Land Reform Commission has faced legislative and political delays.

State governors are the most powerful statutory actors, with authority over statutory rights of occupancy, urban land allocation, consent, and revocation established by the Land Use Act. State Ministries of Lands and geographic information systems (GIS) such as AGIS in Abuja, LAGIS in Lagos, KADGIS in Kaduna, KANGIS in Kano, BOGIS in Borno, and similar agencies in other states have been central to digitization, record modernization, revenue generation, and service delivery. Their effectiveness varies significantly, reflecting differences in state capacity, political commitment, staffing, technology, and transparency.

Local government councils have statutory responsibilities for non-urban land and customary rights of occupancy. However, many lack the survey, planning, legal, digital, and records-management capacity required to manage rural land at scale. In many rural communities, traditional rulers, family heads, ward heads, district heads, and customary institutions continue to allocate land, settle disputes, validate transfers, identify lineage claims, and determine socially legitimate rights. This customary authority can increase accessibility and social legitimacy, but it can also reproduce exclusion where women, migrants, pastoralists, youth, tenants, and minority groups are not represented in decision-making.

The practical challenge is not simply that Nigeria has too many institutions; it is that the mandates of these institutions are not harmonized around a single, trusted, inclusive, and low-cost land information system. Interventions for formalization of land rights should be designed as institutional coordination projects as much as titling projects, and should establish clear roles for state land agencies, local governments, traditional leaders, women's groups, pastoral associations, survey professionals, legal aid providers, financial institutions, and civil society monitors.

Situation on the Ground

Informality, registration costs, and dead capital

Land tenure in Nigeria is characterized by pervasive informality, and the quality of the country's land administration is considered low (FMHUD, 2024). High transactions costs in the formal system, which requires an average of 12 procedures and 92 days to register property with costs reaching up to 11 percent of property value, create incentives for informal land markets and discourage low-income households, women, youth, smallholders, and small enterprises from formal registration.

Informality is not the same as absence of rights. Many households have legitimate customary, family, rental, lease, occupation, inheritance, or community-recognized rights that are socially valid but administratively invisible. However, these rights are difficult to use as collateral, defend against compulsory acquisition or elite capture, and transfer lawfully. For women, an additional difficulty lies in the enforceability of these customary rights against male relatives, particularly in the context of succession and inheritance. A fit-for-purpose registration program should therefore start from locally legitimate rights and progressively convert them into recognized, searchable, and gender-responsive records.

Gender-disaggregated land and housing ownership

Available data demonstrate a deep gender gap in land and housing ownership. The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey found that 12 percent of women ages 15–49 own land alone or jointly, compared with 38 percent of men; and 11 percent of women own a house alone or jointly, compared with 37 percent of men (NPC and ICF, 2019). World Bank analysis using harmonized data shows that in Nigeria only 8.2 percent of women ages 20–49 report sole ownership of land, compared with 34.2 percent of men, and that ownership of land alone or jointly is 16.9 percent for women compared with 41.3 percent for men (Behr et al., 2023).

The 2023/2024 Nigeria General Household Survey-Panel adds important information on agricultural plots. It reports that female-managed plots are more likely than male-managed plots to be rented, and that nationally, 29.9 percent of female-managed plots and 23.3 percent of male-managed plots have title deeds, while family receipts are a common form of documentation for male-managed plots. This survey also reports that households have an average of 2.4 plots, with average plot size around 0.5 hectares, and that only 1.7 percent of plots are irrigated (NBS and World Bank, 2024). These figures highlight two points: first, women’s land rights are not absent but under documented and often less secure; and second, insecure tenure interacts with lower access to irrigation, mechanization, inputs, and finance.

Table 2: Selected gender-disaggregated land and housing indicators for Nigeria

Indicator	Women	Men	Source / interpretation
Own land alone or jointly, ages 15–49	12%	38%	2018 NDHS; shows broad gender gap in land ownership.
Own a house alone or jointly, ages 15–49	11%	37%	2018 NDHS; women are much less likely to own housing assets.
Sole land ownership, ages 20–49	8.2%	34.2%	World Bank gender indicators; sole ownership gap is especially large.
Own land alone or jointly, ages 20–49	16.9%	41.3%	World Bank gender indicators; joint ownership narrows but does not close the gap.
Plots with title deeds by sex of plot manager	29.9% of female-managed plots	23.3% of male-managed plots	GHS-Panel Wave 5; documentation type varies by region and sex of plot manager.
Average plot size by household headship	0.4 ha in female-headed households	0.6 ha in male-headed households	GHS-Panel Wave 5; female-headed households manage smaller plots on average.

Source: 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NPC & ICF, 2019); World Bank (2025a, 2025b); and GHS-Panel Wave 5 (NBS & World Bank, 2024).

Customary law and social norms: why women's rights remain insecure

Customary law remains the dominant practical framework for rural land relations in many parts of Nigeria. This matters for women's rights because customary tenure often recognizes land as lineage or family property, administered through male elders, male household heads, or male heirs. Women may have strong use rights, cultivation rights, residence rights, or rights through marriage, but these rights are frequently treated as secondary to male lineage ownership. This means that a woman may work land for many years without her name appearing on any receipt, allocation document, register, or certificate.

The rationale for limiting women's land rights varies by region and community. In many patrilineal systems, land is inherited through male lines because daughters are expected to marry into another lineage and wives are viewed as joining the husband's family rather than acquiring autonomous lineage rights. Widows may be allowed to remain on land while raising children, but their claim is commonly treated as possession or maintenance rather than ownership. Daughters may be excluded from family land on the assumption that they will benefit from their husband's lineage. In Muslim inheritance contexts, women have recognized shares under Islamic law, but social pressure, family negotiation, and dependence on male relatives may cause women to relinquish, under-claim, or fail to document their shares. The overall result is a recurring pattern: women's land claims are often mediated through relationships with men and are therefore more vulnerable to divorce, widowhood, migration, remarriage, family conflict, and displacement.

However, these customary norms are not static. They can be reformed through court decisions, legal literacy, community by-laws, administrative guidance, and inclusive registration processes. The key is to avoid forcing women to choose between asserting rights and preserving family peace. Gender-transformative land programming should make women's rights visible through household dialogue, community validation, women's representation in adjudication teams, confidential grievance channels, and registration protocols that name women where they hold rights as owners, spouses, widows, daughters, co-holders, tenants, occupiers, or users of common resources.

Pastoral communities, farmer–herder conflict, and gendered impacts

Pastoral land governance is a large and very sensitive land issue in Nigeria. Competition between sedentary farmers and mobile or semi-mobile pastoralists has escalated in parts of the North Central, North West, North East, and adjoining zones. The resulting farmer–herder violence has killed and displaced thousands of Nigerians, creating a major security problem (ICG, 2021). A host of problems contribute to the conflict, including climate change and variability, desertification, insecurity, population growth, expansion of cultivation, blocked stock routes, shrinking access to water, cattle rustling, proliferation of small arms, and political mobilization.

Land governance failures are at the heart of this crisis. When grazing reserves are encroached upon by cultivation or settlement, stock routes are blocked, access to rivers, ponds, dams and boreholes is obstructed by dry-season farms or other competing land uses, and pastoral access rights remain unrecorded, pastoralists may be forced to move through farmers' cultivated fields, causing crop damage and deepening distrust of state institutions. Both groups may feel that state institutions have not protected them, yet SPRiNG's 2025 study found that grazing reserves and stock routes remain relevant, and can serve as mechanisms for reducing conflict if rehabilitated, demarcated, and managed with reliable information and pastoral participation (Blench, 2025).

Gender inequalities are frequently missed in efforts to address farmer–herder conflict. Women farmers lose crops, income, food stocks, and safety when violence escalates. Pastoral women lose access to milk markets, small stock, water, fuel, and social networks when mobility is restricted or households are displaced. Women and girls in internally displaced persons camps in North Central Nigeria have reported severe negative effects on physical health, psychological well-being, education, social relations, and economic conditions due to farmer–herder violence (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2024). Land reform therefore needs a peacebuilding lens: mapping and registration should not only capture private parcels but also common resources, seasonal use rights, corridors, and water points, while dispute resolution mechanisms must include women from farming and pastoral communities.

Key Challenges

The key challenges to improved land governance, especially for women and pastoralists, are summarized here.

Institutional bottlenecks and weak implementation. In Nigeria, a Certificate of Occupancy is formal evidence of a statutory or customary right of occupancy rather than proof of absolute or freehold ownership. It gives the holder a strong, legally recognized and transferable possessory interest, subject to the Land Use Act, but remains rebuttable where another person establishes a superior pre-existing title. The concentration of formal land authority in state governors creates bottlenecks in issuance of Certificates of Occupancy, consent to transactions, and approval. Processes for transfer of rights are often slow, costly, paper-based, and vulnerable to staff discretion. At the same time, local governments responsible for rural land frequently lack technical and financial capacity. Traditional institutions remain socially powerful but are not consistently integrated into transparent, rights-compliant land administration. This institutional fragmentation weakens public trust.

Lack of a complete, gender-responsive cadastral and land information system. Systematic registration requires reliable spatial data, parcel identifiers, maps, rights records, and information on dispute status. Many states have digitized parts of their land records, but Nigeria lacks a harmonized national land information architecture that can support low-cost documentation across all states. Even where digitization is progressing, many systems do not include mandatory sex-disaggregated fields, spousal details, names of co-holders and secondary rights holders, or indicators showing whether women’s names appear on certificates.

Legal pluralism and dual consent. Landholders often need both statutory approval and customary acceptance. A person may secure government documents but face resistance from land-owning families, tenants, community members, or pastoral users. Conversely, a person may have strong customary recognition but no formal documentation. This duality increases transaction costs, litigation, and uncertainty. It also makes women’s claims vulnerable where family elders recognize male relatives as the primary holders even if women have cultivated, inherited, purchased, or contributed to the land.

Gender barriers in formalization. Women face financial, legal, social, and administrative barriers in formalizing land rights. Survey fees, registration fees, transport costs, identity documentation, literacy constraints, and time burdens can exclude women from formalization. Social barriers are equally important. A woman who asks to be named on a land document may be accused of challenging her husband, brothers, or in-laws. Widows and daughters may avoid contesting inheritance for fear of losing family support. These barriers mean that registration processes, even when formally open, can still produce male-dominated outcomes unless gender safeguards are built into every step.

Pastoral tenure insecurity and conflict sensitivity. Pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, and communities using common resources often lack clear documentation of access rights. If systematic registration focuses only on fixed residential and agricultural parcels, it may unintentionally extinguish seasonal grazing, water, forest, or corridor rights. If registration is implemented in conflict-affected areas without careful facilitation, it may deepen competition by formalizing the rights of stronger groups and excluding mobile or marginalized users. This is a major risk for pastoral women, who are rarely visible in formal land meetings but are directly affected by loss of mobility and common resources.

Opportunities and Promising Approaches

Four key approaches offer an opportunity to improve land governance in Nigeria, with an explicit focus on improving the recognition and enforcement of women's rights.

Systematic land titling and registration with explicit women's rights indicators

Systematic land titling and registration (SLTR) offers a practical shift from expensive demand-led registration to area-based, supply-led documentation. Nigeria has piloted SLTR in states such as Kano, where it was introduced to simplify certification processes and reduce cost for citizens (KANGIS, 2017). In addition, several states are using GIS to modernize land administration. The national Land4Growth program now provides a national policy opening for scaling land registration, documentation, and titling (FMHUD, 2025).

Although Nigeria has no explicit national joint-titling provision and no government program focused specifically on registering women's land rights (Behr et al., 2023), recent Nigeria-specific practice shows the potential of women-focused titling. In Borno State, a systematic land titling project supported by the African Cities Research Consortium and implemented with the states' GIS, enabled women in informal settlements in Maiduguri to register land and receive statutory rights in their own names (ACRC, 2025). This example should be studied as a practical model for how state systems can document women as rights holders where legal, administrative, and community facilitation are aligned.

However, publicly available evidence does not show a regularly published, nationally consolidated administrative indicator reporting how many Certificates of Occupancy and other registered land-right documents in Nigeria record women as sole or joint holders. Available information is fragmented across state land agencies, individual SLTR programmes and household surveys and does not consistently identify women holding rights as spouses, daughters, widows, successors or holders of customary and derivative interests. This constitutes an important monitoring gap. Future SLTR investments should require person-level, sex-disaggregated registry data that distinguish sole, joint and other recorded rights and report them through a common results framework aligned with SDG Indicator 5.a.1 (Adeniyi, 2013; Begum et al., 2017; Doss et al., 2015; FAO, 2024).

A gender-responsive SLTR program in Nigeria should include, among others, the following minimum safeguards: mandatory collection of sex-disaggregated information in SLTR; forms that allow sole female ownership, joint spousal documentation, family co-holding, widow possession, daughters' inheritance, and secondary rights to be recorded; household dialogues, as well as legal aid services, should be accessible to women; a grievance redress mechanism that allows women to raise objections confidentially and safely; and legal literacy support for women rights holders should be provided.

Legal literacy and rights-compliant alternative dispute resolution

Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) is the collective term for procedures used to prevent, manage or resolve disputes outside, or alongside, conventional court litigation. In Nigeria, ADR commonly includes negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration, as well as court-connected mediation and customary community-based settlement processes. Mediation and conciliation assist the parties to reach their own agreement, whereas arbitration ordinarily results in a decision—or award—made by an impartial arbitrator and binding on the parties. The principal federal statutory framework is the Arbitration and Mediation Act 2023, which repealed the former Arbitration and Conciliation Act, Cap. A18, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004. Part I regulates arbitration, while Part II—sections 67–87—regulates mediation, including confidentiality and the binding and enforceable character of mediated settlement agreements under section 82. In the land sector, ADR may be used to address disputes concerning parcel boundaries, family and customary land allocations, inheritance, tenancy, access routes, grazing and water access, crop damage and compensation. It may involve professional mediators, arbitrators, court-annexed ADR centres, traditional authorities, community leaders or other neutral facilitators. ADR is particularly valuable where the parties have continuing social or livelihood relationships because it can provide faster, less adversarial and locally appropriate solutions.

Legal literacy and ADR are essential because most land disputes are resolved outside formal courts, and litigation is often expensive, slow, adversarial, and inaccessible to women and rural communities. ADR should not be treated simply as informal compromise. It must be rights-compliant, gender-sensitive, and connected to formal remedies where discrimination, violence, fraud, or coercion is present.

In practice, a strengthened land ADR model for Nigeria should include trained mediators, traditional leaders, women leaders, paralegals, pastoral representatives, legal aid providers, and registry officials. It should distinguish between boundary disputes, inheritance disputes, spousal/co-holder disputes, tenancy disputes, pastoral access disputes, compulsory acquisition grievances, and fraud. For women, ADR is useful where it reduces costs and preserves social relationships, but it is risky where mediators pressure women to surrender legal rights for family harmony. Therefore, every ADR mechanism should include minimum standards: informed consent, no coercion, participation of women mediators, written settlement records, referral to courts or legal aid where rights are violated, and the ability to record mediated outcomes in the land register.

Legal literacy should translate the Ukeje and Anekwe decisions into simple community messages. Daughters cannot be excluded from inheriting their father's property merely because they are female. Widows cannot be dispossessed through customs that deny them possession or treat them as property. Spouses and co-holders should be named where they hold rights. Women pastoralists and farmers should participate in mapping corridors, water points, and common resources. These messages should be delivered through women's associations, farmer groups, pastoral associations, religious leaders, market associations, radio, legal aid clinics, and community land committees.

Digital land administration with gender and conflict safeguards

Digitization can reduce search times, improve revenue, reduce opportunities for corruption, and make land records more secure. However, digitization is not automatically inclusive. If historical records are male-dominated, digitizing them without adjudication can reproduce gender inequality at scale. If common resources and pastoral corridors are absent from the database, digitization can make them administratively invisible. A rights-responsive digital land system should therefore include data fields for sex of rights holders, marital/co-holder status, type of right, source of acquisition, dispute status, secondary

rights, pastoral/common resource rights, and evidence type. It should also track service standards, fee waivers, and grievance outcomes.

Interoperability offers another opportunity. A national digital land repository can set minimum data standards while allowing states to retain statutory control under the Land Use Act. Such standards should include a mandatory gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) module and a conflict-sensitivity module. The goal should not be centralization for its own sake, but to provide comparable, searchable, and auditable records across states.

Gender-transformative approaches

Gender-transformative approaches address the power relations, norms, institutional practices, and incentives that determine whether women can claim and control land. Some evidence on joint titling and persuasive communication comes from World Bank Gender Innovation Lab studies outside Nigeria, but needs to be tested locally in Nigeria. The Nigeria-specific evidence base includes the constitutional cases on daughters and widows, Nigerian household survey data showing ownership gaps, state-level SLTR experience, the Borno women’s titling example, and civil society legal literacy efforts on women’s inheritance.

For Nigeria, a gender-transformative approach should combine five elements:

- 1. Law: translate constitutional equality and Supreme Court rulings into state land administration regulations, practice directions, and forms.
- 2. Norms: work with men, women, traditional leaders, religious leaders, youth, and pastoral associations to show how women’s secure land rights improve household welfare, agricultural investment, and conflict prevention.
- 3. Services: reduce the cost of registration and provide mobile legal aid, paralegal support, and registry help desks for women.
- 4. Data: require every land program to report how many documents include women’s names and what type of rights those documents record.
- 5. Accountability: create grievance systems, monitoring dashboards, and independent audits to ensure that women, widows, daughters, pastoralists, tenants, and secondary rights holders are not excluded.

Strategic Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed for a development partner interested in land tenure security, women’s land rights, agricultural transformation, and conflict-sensitive governance in Nigeria.

Table 3: Strategic recommendations for strengthening land tenure security and women’s land rights in Nigeria

Recommendation	Why it matters	Priority actions
1. Support gender-responsive SLTR in selected reform-ready states.	Systematic registration is the most scalable way to reduce informality, but it must formalize records for both men and women.	Finance pilots with mandatory women’s name indicators; subsidize fees for women and vulnerable households; include joint/co-holder fields; publish sex-disaggregated results.
2. Develop state registry practices for women, widows, daughters, and joint holders.	The Land Use Act is gender-neutral but administratively silent on how to record women’s rights.	Draft model forms; require spousal/co-holder disclosure; recognize widow possession and daughters’ inheritance claims; train registry staff and adjudication teams.

3. Map pastoral and common resource rights in conflict-sensitive areas.	Pastoral corridors, grazing areas, and water points are often invisible in parcel-based registration.	Participatory mapping with pastoralists and farmers; include pastoral women; protect stock routes and water points; integrate records into land-use plans.
4. Fund community legal literacy and rights-compliant ADR.	Women often know neither their constitutional rights nor how to enforce them without destroying family relationships.	Translate Ukeje and Anekwe decisions into community tools; train women mediators and paralegals; record mediated settlements; refer rights violations to legal aid and courts.
5. Build a national land data standard that promotes gender equality and social inclusion.	Nigeria lacks consistent gender-disaggregated data on land rights documentation.	Create indicators on women's names, sole/joint/co-holder rights, inheritance, pastoral/common rights, dispute resolution, and post-registration use of documents.
6. Link land tenure security to agriculture and climate investments.	Land rights affect long-term investment in soil, irrigation, tree crops, and climate-smart agriculture.	Prioritize women farmers and pastoral women in extension, finance, irrigation, agroforestry, livestock services, and value-chain support where rights are documented.

Source: Authors.

Conclusion

Nigeria's land governance system, anchored in the constitutionally entrenched Land Use Act, has not delivered secure, affordable, and inclusive land documentation for most citizens. The consequences are visible in informality, dead capital, weak collateralization, urban and rural disputes, pastoral conflict, low investment in agricultural productivity, and persistent gender inequality.

However, a significant opportunity for reform has been opened by national attention to Land4Growth, state-level digitization, experience with SLTR, Supreme Court jurisprudence on women's inheritance, and growing evidence on gender-transformative land programming. Land tenure security will not be achieved by technology alone. Technology must be combined with legal reform, administrative simplification, community legitimacy, safeguards for women's rights, recognition of pastoral tenure, and accessible dispute resolution.

For development partners, the strategic entry point will be in supporting an evidence-based, gender-transformative, and conflict-sensitive land tenure program that links documentation to agricultural productivity, women's economic empowerment, food security, and resilience. Such a program should measure success not only by the number of titles issued, but by whose rights are recognized, whose names appear on documents, whether widows and daughters can use the law, whether pastoral women and women farmers are included, and whether documented rights translate into investment, security, and improved livelihoods.

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