

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

Policy Analysis, Implementation Gaps, and Gender-Transformative Pathways

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Key Messages

- ▶ Ethiopia's land rights regime has evolved from an unequal imperial system, through nationalization, to a contemporary federal framework that recognizes secure, inheritable, registrable, and transferable land-use rights for women and men farmers and pastoralists.
- ▶ Ethiopia has undertaken one of Africa's largest rural land certification reforms over the past three decades, beginning with provision of household certificates and progressing to geospatial mapping of parcels and a digital registry of landholdings. By 2024, an estimated 23 million certificates had been produced.
- ▶ While the certification reforms are a huge achievement, key challenges to transforming recognized rights into usable rights remain, especially for women, pastoral communities, and peri-urban households.
- ▶ Progress towards gender equality in land rights is real, but uneven. Women are still less likely to have documented ownership compared to men, and they face constraints in controlling farmland, accessing credit, and benefitting from climate finance.
- ▶ Future policies and investments should focus on keeping rights current through registry maintenance, enforceable, gender-equitable, and adaptable to pastoral, peri-urban, and climate-vulnerable contexts.

Context and Background

Historical trajectory and the contemporary land-use-rights model

The trajectory of land tenure in Ethiopia is distinct within sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike many other African systems, which reflect colonial-era practices, Ethiopia's contemporary land regime is the result of a sharp rupture with imperial-era land relations, followed by successive state-led reforms. Prior to 1974, imperial tenure was characterized by systems such as *rist*, a lineage-based holding arrangement in parts of the northern highlands, and *gult*, a tribute-collecting and administrative entitlement associated with imperial and noble authority. These diverse arrangements created marked regional variation and, in several southern areas, high levels of tenancy and absentee landlordism (Deininger et al., 2008; Crewett, Bogale and Korf, 2008). This changed under the Derg regime, with the 1975 Public Ownership of Rural Lands Proclamation, which nationalized rural land, abolished landlordism, and made peasant associations central to land allocation. This reform addressed important historical inequities but created a new insecurity: land redistribution and the fear of redistribution reduced farmers' incentives to make long-term investments in soil conservation, tree planting, irrigation, and other durable land improvements (Deininger et al., 2008).

The current regime, established after 1991 and codified in the 1995 Constitution, is a land-use-rights model. It retains public or common ownership of land but also recognizes legally protected landholding rights (see Table 1 for a summary of current legislation). While it states that land is not subject to sale or exchange, use rights and improvements may be inherited, rented, leased, exchanged in legally permitted circumstances, compensated, and recorded in the register. Land-use rights are affirmed through articles that protect Ethiopian peasants against eviction and grant access to land without payment; recognize pastoralists' right to free land for grazing and cultivation and protect them from displacement; and recognize private ownership of permanent improvements on land (FDRE, 1995). More recently, a government proclamation (No. 1324/2024) further clarified that landholding transfers require the consent of joint holders and spouses, creating an important gender safeguard for joint certification and for any financial product that relies on land certificates (FDRE, 1995, 2024).

Two tenure landscapes: Highland certification and pastoral communal systems

Ethiopia's highland agricultural systems and the lowland pastoral and agro-pastoral regions have distinct tenure landscapes, reflecting not only administrative differences but also different production systems, risk environments, and social rules.

In the northern highlands including large parts of Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, and the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNP) parcel certification is well advanced, largely focused on agricultural parcels held by individuals, spouses, households, or groups. The first round of certification (First Level Land Certification, FLLC), rolled out between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, gave households documentary proof of rights but generally did not create a precise geospatial parcel map. Second Level Land Certification (SLLC), now well underway, demarcates and geospatially maps parcels, identifies right holders, undertakes public display and adjudication, and links certificates to the National Rural Land Administration Information System (NRLAIS). The SLLC model works best where land use is relatively stable and parcel boundaries can be identified, publicly displayed, verified, and updated (Deininger et al., 2008; MoA/LaGo, 2024).

In the pastoral and agro-pastoral lowlands, including Afar and Somali, communal, flexible, mobility-based tenure remains essential for ecological survival. Tenure is organized around mobility, seasonal access, reciprocal use arrangements, grazing reserves, water points, drought refuges, and clan or community governance. Productive assets include not only fixed plots but also access to corridors, pasture, water, and social networks that allow herds and households to survive climate variability. Imposing highland-style fixed parcelization on pastoral areas can weaken adaptive systems, create conflict, and undermine women's access to the resources they use for household nutrition, livestock care, water, fuel, and market engagement (Reda, 2014; Abebe and Flintan, 2021).

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation No. 1324/2024*, recognizes this regional difference more clearly. It requires that regions with pastoral populations issue pastoral communal land administration and use laws; prohibits partitioning and privatizing communal lands except through a pastoral community decision supported by a study; and requires regional laws to recognize customary land administration and use systems, subject to constitutional rights, women's rights, and other legal protections. Afar's regional rural land law similarly provides for surveying, registration, and certification of communal pastoral lands in the name of the community and restricts the conversion of communal grazing land into private holdings (FDRE, 2024; Afar National Regional State, 2009).

Why land tenure security matters for Ethiopia's development agenda

Land remains central to Ethiopia's economy and to rural poverty reduction. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing accounted for approximately 35 percent of national GDP in 2024, and agriculture provided an estimated 60 percent of employment. In this context, the security and governance of rural land rights are central to food production, food security, women's economic empowerment, climate resilience, and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2026a, 2026b).

Security of land tenure is particularly important for fostering long-term investment in productivity-enhancing and climate-resilience measures, such as terraces, soil bunds, tree planting, water harvesting structures, and restoration of degraded lands. These investments require confidence that rights will not be arbitrarily redistributed, extinguished, or captured. Studies from Ethiopia have found positive links between land certification and tree planting, soil conservation, land rental participation, and food security (Mekonnen et al., 2012; Ghebru and Holden, 2013; Holden and Ghebru, 2016).

Secure tenure thus underpins Ethiopia's climate and landscape agenda. Landscape restoration, carbon sequestration, sustainable land management, and green growth require clarity over who holds rights, who gives consent, who bears restrictions, and who receives benefits. Climate finance can enhance tenure security if women and community users are explicitly recognized in registers, governance bodies, and benefit-sharing rules. It can also deepen exclusion if restoration funds are tied to land records that overlook women, secondary users, youth, pastoral women, or users of communal land (World Bank, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Policy and Legal Framework Governing Land

Federal constitutional foundation and regional competence

Ethiopia's land framework is federal—the Constitution sets the core principles and federal framework laws establish national standards. In conformance with this framework, regional states administer land

within their territories through regional constitutions, proclamations, regulations, and implementing institutions. This arrangement is particularly important following Proclamation No. 1324/2024, which requires that regional legal instruments, operational manuals, forms, fee schedules, institutional mandates, and digital workflows be brought into conformity with the new federal framework. Until that alignment is complete, implementation may vary across regions, particularly in treatment of polygamous unions, spousal consent, communal pastoral land certification, transaction updating, land information systems, and representation of poor women and vulnerable groups in land disputes.

Table 1: Federal framework and relevance for women's land rights

Instrument / institution	Key provision or role	Relevance for women's land rights and implementation
FDRE Constitution, Article 40(3)	Land and natural resources are owned by the State and peoples of Ethiopia; land is common property and not subject to sale or exchange.	Clarifies that land ownership is public/common property. Programs should avoid describing rural land as privately owned in freehold terms.
FDRE Constitution, Articles 40(4) and 40(5)	Peasants and pastoralists have rights to land; pastoralists have rights to land for grazing and cultivation and to not be displaced.	Supports protection of rural and pastoral land users against arbitrary loss of land and informs compensation, communal registration, and pastoral land-use planning.
FDRE Constitution, Article 35(7)	Women have equal rights with men to acquire, administer, control, use, and transfer property, including land, and equal treatment in inheritance.	Provides the constitutional anchor for joint certification, women's inheritance rights, spousal consent, and protection against discriminatory customary practices.
Proclamation No. 1324/2024, Articles 21-23	Requires joint-holder/spousal consent for landholding transfers; certificates are issued in the name of all joint holders/spouses; protects wives in polygamous unions through registration and partition/updating rules.	Addresses hidden-spouse and unilateral-transfer risks. Multilateral Finance Institutions, land offices, and courts should require written consent from all named spouses/joint holders before transactions affecting joint land rights.
Proclamation No. 1324/2024, Articles 24 and 35-37	Provides for communal land certification, pastoral communal laws, prohibition of default privatization of communal lands, and recognition of customary systems subject to constitutional rights.	Creates legal basis for pastoral communal certification and for gender-responsive governance rules in communal land institutions.
Proclamation No. 1324/2024, Articles 41, 58-61, and 67	Provides representation support for poor women and vulnerable groups; regulates fees; assigns federal and regional institutional mandates; repeals prior inconsistent laws and practices.	Links legal empowerment, affordable updating, and institutional alignment to the sustainability of the certification system.
Regional constitutions and regional land proclamations	Regions administer land and issue detailed laws in conformity with federal law.	Regional law review is needed to ensure the 2024 reforms are reflected in actual services, forms, certificates, land administration committee (LAC) guidance, and dispute resolution practice.
Ministry of Agriculture/Rural Land Administration and Use Directorate/Department	Federal rural land administration lead: standards, technical support, NRLAIS, donor coordination, and harmonization.	Important for national standards, gender-disaggregated monitoring, consistency across SLLCs, transaction updating, and climate-linked land governance.
Regional land bureaus and woreda/kebele land offices	Primary implementation institutions for certification, updating, local adjudication, public display, and service delivery.	The quality of women's rights depends heavily on local capacity, gender-balanced LACs, affordable services, and women's legal awareness.

Proclamation No. 1324/2024: Modernization, gender, and customary tenure

Proclamation No. 1324/2024 modernizes the rural land administration framework in four ways that directly respond to the implementation gap in land administration. First, it strengthens digital land administration by creating a clearer mandate for NRLAIS. Second, it addresses transaction integrity by requiring the

consent of joint holders and spouses before landholding transfers. Third, it makes gender protection more specific by requiring certificates to be prepared in the name of all spouses or joint holders and by addressing land held in polygamous unions. Fourth, it creates a firmer legal bridge to pastoral and communal systems by requiring regional laws for these systems as well as by recognizing customary land administration systems, subject to constitutional safeguards (FDRE, 2024).

The provision on polygamous unions is important, as 11 percent of married women and 5 percent of married men ages 15–49 were in polygynous unions as of 2016 (CSA and ICF, 2016). Without specific registration rules, women in these unions may be invisible in land records, excluded from compensation, denied a say in land rentals or collateralization, or weakened in divorce, inheritance, and succession disputes. To address this issue, the 2024 law should be operationalized through clear forms, public information campaigns, land administration committee (LAC) guidance, certificate formats, and dispute-resolution protocols. LAC generally refers to a Land Administration Committee. In Ethiopian regional legislation, the body may be formally called a Kebele Rural Land Administration and Use Committee, sometimes abbreviated as KLAUC. A LAC is a community-level land administration body established at kebele level. It normally works with the kebele land administration office or land expert and the woreda—district—land administration office. It is not a national land commission and does not own land; rather, it supports the public administration of rural land rights within its locality.

The law's provisions on pastoral land use also require careful operationalization. Pastoral and agro-pastoral certification should document communal rights, seasonal access, corridors, water points, drought reserves, and customary governance arrangements in ways that strengthen, rather than replace, flexible tenure. This must include women's representation and benefit rights, because pastoral women often exercise land and resource rights through household, lineage, clan, or customary institutions rather than through individualized title (Abebe and Flintan, 2021; FDRE, 2024).

Rural and urban institutional separation

Administration of rural and urban land is separated in Ethiopia. Rural land administration is led by the Ministry of Agriculture, while urban land is governed through a separate urban leasehold regime under the Ministry of Urban and Infrastructure and by regional/municipal structures. This division matters most in peri-urban areas, where rural landholding rights may be converted from the rural to the urban system or eliminated as cities expand. If conversion processes are not transparent, coordinated, and gender-sensitive, women may lose joint rural rights, compensation may be paid to male household heads only, and livelihood restoration may fail to account for women's land-based income, fuel, grazing, garden, water, or market-use interests (Hiil, 2024; FDRE, 2024).

A gender-responsive peri-urban transition therefore requires: (i) verifying all named and actual rights holders before expropriation or conversion; (ii) requiring consent and notice to all spouses and joint holders; (iii) paying compensation into mechanisms that protect women's shares; (iv) recording secondary and use rights; and (v) linking rural and urban land information systems so that rights are not lost at the rural–urban boundary.

Reality on the Ground

Certification architecture: From First Level to Second Level Land Certification

Ethiopia's land certification process has evolved in two main phases. FLLC, implemented mainly from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s in the major highland regions, used locally accessible, low-cost, community-based adjudication to issue household certificates. This process typically included names and sometimes photographs of rights holders, but did not provide a complete geospatial parcel map. Its main achievement was to reduce fear of redistribution and provide immediate documentary proof of landholding rights (Deininger et al., 2008; UN Women, 2022).

SLLC, begun in the 2010s, improves on FLLC by surveying and mapping parcels, recording boundaries, displaying rights for public verification, and linking certificates to digital records. SLLC is therefore not simply a better paper certificate; it is a shift toward a spatially referenced land administration system. Major implementation support has come from donor-supported programs—LIFT, REILA, CALM and RLLP (see Table 2 for a summary of these implementation programs). LIFT, which ran from 2013 to 2021, supported rural land certification, land rental formalization, land investment, and SLLC-linked credit products in Amhara, Oromia, SNNP, and Tigray. CALM expanded land certification and NRLAIS operationalization while linking land administration to climate-resilient landscape management (DAI, 2018; World Bank, 2024; MoA/LaGo, 2024).

The scale reached by these programs is considerable. A 2024 review estimated that about 23 million SLLCs had been produced or distributed, accounting for almost half of the estimated highland rural parcels. The World Bank's CALM indicated that it had issued more than 17 million SLLCs and that more than 400 *woredas* had operational NRLAIS by April 2024. These achievements put Ethiopia among the global leaders in low-cost, large-scale rural land certification (World Bank, 2024; MoA/LaGo, 2024).

Table 2: Implementation programs, methods, and evidence

Certification / program	Approximate period and method	Evidence and relevance
FLLC—First Level Land Certification	Late 1990s to mid-2000s; community-based adjudication and household certificates, generally without precise geospatial parcel maps.	Improved perceived tenure security and reduced fear of redistribution; important foundation for later SLLC.
SLLC—Second Level Land Certification	2010s onward; parcel demarcation using ortho-imagery/GPS, public display, adjudication, certificate issuance, and digital records.	Provides geospatial proof of rights and supports updating, dispute reduction, finance, land-use planning and climate-linked land governance.
LIFT—Land Investment for Transformation Programme	2013–2021; DFID/UK-funded program implemented by DAI in Amhara, Oromia, SNNP, and Tigray.	Supported around 14 million certificates, land rental service providers, formalized transactions, and SLLC-linked loan products.
REILA—Responsible and Innovative Land Administration Project	The overall REILA programme has operated from July 2011 and is presently expected to continue until August 2028 Responsible and innovative land administration program funded by Finland.	Supported SLLC and institutional capacity strengthening.
CALM—Climate Action through Landscape Management	With the implementation period 18 June 2019–7 September 2026, the World Bank Program-for-Results links SLLC, NRLAIS, landscape restoration, and climate action. A Phase 2 of CALM is anticipated to be implemented until 2031	Reported more than 17 million SLLCs and more than 400 operational NRLAIS <i>woredas</i> by April 2024.
RLLP—Resilient Landscapes and Livelihoods Project	With the implementation period of 18 April 2019–7 July 2024, the World Bank-supported Resilient Landscapes and Livelihoods work.	Linked land certification and sustainable land management in selected landscapes.

Gender-disaggregated land rights evidence

Ethiopia's joint certification has produced significant formal recognition of women's rights. The Gender Asset Gap Survey 2021, which measured documented ownership and acquisition pathways by sex, found that among agricultural landowners, documented ownership was high but not equal: 71.6 percent of women owners and 79.5 percent of men owners had documentation. It also found that of these owner-ships, approximately 89 percent of agricultural land was jointly owned, indicating that joint certification is a central feature of Ethiopia's formal land rights (ESS, UN Women and World Bank, 2022).

However, women continue to acquire land primarily through marriage, while inheritance is more common for men's land acquisition. The same survey found that marriage accounted for 36 percent of women's acquisition of agricultural land, compared with only 2.7 percent for men, while inheritance accounted for 23.1 percent of women's land acquisition and 46.1 percent of men's. This difference explains why addressing divorce, widowhood, and polygamous unions, document custody, and spousal consent remain central to women's effective land tenure security (ESS, UN Women and World Bank, 2022).

A study of plot-level productivity in Ethiopia provides evidence of larger inequities in women's effective land-use rights. Productivity evidence should be framed carefully, considering not only household headship or tenure security but also household decision making on agricultural land use and land access for production. The study shows that male-managed plots were 23.4 percentage points more productive than female-managed plots, and that a significant share of this gap reflects differences in access to labor, inputs, extension, crop choice, and unobserved structural factors. Looking at women's plot management links directly to women's control, decision-making, labor constraints, and access to credit, dispute resolution, and other services (Aguilar et al., 2015), as well as opportunities to benefit from compensation or climate finance.

Table 3: Recent statistics on women's and men's land-use rights and policy implications

Indicator	Statistic	Implications for land rights policy
Agricultural land documentation among owners	Women: 71.6%; Men: 79.5%	Formal recognition is high, but women remain less likely than men to have documented ownership.
Joint ownership of agricultural land	About 89% of agricultural land is jointly owned.	Joint certification is a major success, but joint ownership must be protected through spousal consent, document custody, and transaction safeguards.
Acquisition through marriage	Women: 36%; Men: 2.7%	Women's rights are more dependent on marital relations; polygamous unions, divorce, and widowhood need explicit safeguards.
Acquisition through inheritance	Women: 23.1%; Men: 46.1%	Customary inheritance norms continue to shape women's land access, despite constitutional equality.
Polygynous unions	11% of married women aged 15–49 and 5% of married men aged 15–49 reported polygynous unions (EDHS 2016)	The 2024 law's protection of wives in polygamous unions addresses a real and measurable implementation issue.
Agricultural productivity by plot manager	Male-managed plots were 23.4 percentage points more productive than female-managed plots.	Policy should address input, labor, extension and market constraints facing women managers, not only certificate issuance.
Land justice burden	The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiIL) estimated 8.2–8.6 million land-related legal problems over a four-year period; average land dispute resolution cost about 30,000 birr and took around 300 days.	Accessible legal empowerment, affordable dispute resolution, and gender transformative customary/formal linkages are essential.

What formal rights have not yet solved

Certification changes the legal and administrative status of women's land rights but does not automatically change bargaining power, labor constraints, customary norms, document control, or access to finance. In many rural areas, women may be named on a certificate yet still lack control over the certificate, may not be consulted before rental or collateral transactions, may face pressure in divorce or inheritance disputes, or may be unable to farm independently because of labor and oxen-plowing constraints. UN Women correctly argues that support must move beyond land registration to the full range of benefits that women should derive from secure land rights (UN Women, 2022).

In practical terms, the next phase must ask whether women are able to: keep copies of certificates; participate in land rental or transfer decisions; access SLLC-linked credit as borrowers or co-borrowers; inherit land equally; obtain fair shares on divorce; use legal aid; participate in LACs; receive compensation directly or jointly; benefit from restoration and climate finance; and manage plots with access to labor-saving technologies, extension, inputs, and markets.

Pastoral land and women in pastoral systems

Pastoral tenure must be treated as a distinct rights system rather than as a gap awaiting individual titling. The main tenure challenge in pastoral Ethiopia is to legally recognize flexible communal rights without reducing mobility. Communal certification should therefore map and document grazing areas, water points, dry-season reserves, corridors, shared use arrangements, and customary governance rules. It should not assume that every legitimate right can be converted into a private parcel.

Women's rights in pastoral systems are often less visible because they may be mediated through household, lineage, clan, marriage, or customary decision-making structures. Pastoral women may depend on access to water, milk markets, small ruminants, fuelwood, grazing near settlements, social networks during drought, and community-level benefit sharing. A pastoral land intervention that registers community rights without rules on women's representation, benefit sharing, divorce/widowhood protection, and participation in rangeland governance could reinforce male control at the communal level. A gender-responsive pastoral model should therefore combine communal certification with women's membership in governance bodies, documented rules for women's access and benefits, safeguards for widows and divorced women, and women-inclusive dispute resolution (Abebe and Flintan, 2021; FDRE, 2024).

Key Challenges

Keeping NRLAIS up to date and affordable

The greatest systemwide challenge is not initial certification but maintenance. A land register loses legal and economic value when deaths, inheritances, divorces, rentals, partitions, consolidations, expropriations, and other transactions are not updated. Proclamation No. 1324/2024 provides that initial registration and surveying should not require payment, while fees may be charged for updating landholding data. This creates an opportunity for cost recovery but also a risk: if fees, distance, complexity, or informal charges are too high, landholders, especially women, poorer households, elderly landholders, and pastoral users, may avoid updating certificates (FDRE, 2024; Nerga et al., 2021).

Moreover, NRLAIS sustainability depends on more than software. It also requires reliable electricity and connectivity; trained *woreda* staff; backup systems; affordable and gender-sensitive service standards; integration with paper archives during transition; clear data protection rules; and performance monitoring.

CALM's expansion of operational NRLAIS *woredas* is a strong platform, but the registry must remain a living system, not a one-off project output (World Bank, 2024).

Regional alignment after the 2024 federal law

The 2024 proclamation changes the federal framework, but regional laws, procedures and institutions still need alignment. This is particularly important for the protection of polygamous wives, spousal consent, communal land certification, pastoral customary systems, fees, updating procedures, representation of poor women and vulnerable groups in court, and the institutional roles of regional bureaus and *woreda/kebele* land offices. A regional legal harmonization review should identify provisions that are inconsistent with Proclamation No. 1324/2024 and prioritize amendments, regulations, practice notes, forms, and training materials.

Women's quality of rights: From recognition to control and benefit

The major gender challenge is now the quality of women's rights. Certification has increased formal recognition, but women's effective control remains constrained by social norms, limited legal literacy, male-dominated LACs and customary forums, document custody problems, gendered labor constraints, unequal access to oxen and mechanization, limited extension services, and weaker access to credit and markets. These barriers explain why a woman can be named on a certificate yet still have limited say over crop choices, rental arrangements, collateral use, compensation, or proceeds from the land. Labor-saving technologies, small-scale mechanization, women-friendly extension, and collective service provision can help convert formal rights into effective, productive rights (Aguilar et al., 2015; UN Women, 2022).

The oxen constraint should be part of a broader gender mainstreaming package for agricultural land use systems rather than treated as a standalone issue. In many Ethiopian farming systems, cultural norms discourage women from plowing with oxen. Women managers may therefore rent out land, enter sharecropping arrangements, hire labor, or rely on male relatives, which can reduce income, control, and productivity.

Access to justice and local dispute resolution

Land disputes are frequent and costly. The Ethiopian Land Justice Guidelines, issued by The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiIL), estimate that land issues account for 34 percent of people's most serious legal problems, and identified 8.2–8.6 million land-related legal problems over a four-year period. The average land dispute was estimated to cost about 30,000 birr and the average resolution time was around 300 days. Many rural land disputes are resolved by elders and local forums. These forums are accessible and legitimate, but may be influenced by social norms that disadvantage women in inheritance, divorce, compensation, and boundary disputes (HiIL, 2024).

The 2024 proclamation's provision that enables institutions for women, children, and social affairs to represent poor women and vulnerable groups in courts is therefore important. It should be translated into operational legal aid referral pathways, public information, *kebele*-level support, and coordination between land offices, women's affairs offices, customary leaders, and formal courts (FDRE, 2024).

Rural–urban conversion and gendered compensation risks

The separation between rural and urban land administration creates particular risks in expanding urban and peri-urban areas. Rural land rights may be expropriated or converted into urban leasehold arrangements. Compensation may not reflect the full livelihood value of land, and cash compensation can be captured by the person treated as household representative. Women are at risk where they are named jointly but not consulted, where their secondary or use rights are unrecorded, or where compensation and livelihood restoration do not address women's land-based economic roles. Harmonizing rural and urban records, requiring notice and consent of all joint holders, and paying women directly or jointly are therefore central gender safeguards (HiiL, 2024; FDRE, 2024).

Climate and demographic pressure

Climate change, land degradation, and demographic pressure intensify tenure stress. In highland areas, land fragmentation and declining farm sizes reduce the economic viability of small plots. In pastoral areas, drought and resource scarcity increase competition over water, grazing corridors, and dry-season reserves. Climate investments can help, but only if land rights, use restrictions, benefit sharing, and grievance mechanisms are clear. Otherwise, restoration, exclosures, carbon projects, irrigation schemes, or rangeland investments can generate new conflicts or exclude women and secondary users.

Opportunities and Promising Approaches

Shift from mass certification to rights maintenance and service delivery

Ethiopia has an important opportunity to consolidate the certification achievement by making the registry useful for everyday land administration. This means funding practical service delivery: low-cost updating, mobile service days for legal literacy and land services delivery, women-friendly documentation support, clear service standards, data protection, digitization of legacy records, complaint channels, and performance dashboards. NRLAIS should generate sex-disaggregated indicators on whose rights are registered, who updates transactions, who receives certificates, who accesses credit, who receives compensation, and whose disputes are resolved.

Apply gender-transformative approaches directly to land rights

Gender transformative approaches must be deliberately linked to the decisions that determine women's control and benefits from land. In Ethiopia, this will require using community conversations and male-engagement models to address inheritance, divorce, polygamous union registration, spousal consent, certificate custody, land rental decisions, collateral decisions, compensation, women's participation in LACs, and norms around women farming or managing plots.

Ethiopia already has experience with community conversations and gender-transformative livestock interventions that engage women, men, couples, and community leaders in structured dialogue about social norms, assets, income, and decision-making. The agricultural sector can adapt this approach by integrating land modules into agricultural extension and *kebele* land services. A practical model would combine: (i) community dialogue facilitated by trained development agents and women's affairs officers; (ii) legal literacy on certificate rights and spousal consent; (iii) service days for updating certificates and recording spouses; (iv) LAC and elder training on women's constitutional rights; and (v) monitoring of

whether women actually participate in land decisions after the intervention (Kinati et al., 2023; Lemma, Alemu and Knight-Jones, 2025).

Legal literacy, paralegal support, and land justice pathways

Legal literacy support is necessary because women cannot enforce rights they do not know about. Ethiopia-specific research has shown that customary practice and limited awareness continue to weaken women's rural land rights despite the favorable legal framework. International and regional evidence, including a randomized trial of community-based legal aid for women's land rights in Tanzania, suggests that paralegal support can increase women's knowledge and access to land services, although legal aid alone may not transform deep social norms. Ethiopia should therefore adapt, not simply copy, such models: paralegal or legal-literacy support should be linked to the 2024 Proclamation's representation provisions, women's affairs offices, *kebele* land offices, LACs, and formal courts (Tura, 2014; Mueller et al., 2018; FDRE, 2024).

Make SLLC-linked finance gender-safe and gender-positive

Land certificates can expand access to finance, but they can also create risk if financial products bypass women in joint holdings. LIFT piloted SLLC-linked loan products and reported thousands of loans through microfinance branches. CALM reporting indicates that farmers used SLLCs to access additional credit from banks and microfinance institutions. However, publicly available monitoring evidence is still limited regarding the sex of borrowers, co-borrowers, and consenting spouses in SLLC-backed loan products. Addressing this gap in evidence and monitoring must be a priority (DAI, 2018; World Bank, 2024).

Policies to ensure women's access and voice in finance should be explicit. Any land-certificate-based loan or collateral product should require written consent of all spouses and joint holders, verify identities against the certificate, provide women with direct information on risks, record whether women are borrowers or co-borrowers, and report sex-disaggregated approval, default, restructuring, and enforcement data. Proclamation No. 1324/2024 already provides the legal basis by requiring that joint holders and spouses must consent to landholding transfers. Financial inclusion should therefore strengthen women's bargaining power rather than converting joint certificates into male-controlled collateral (FDRE, 2024).

Link digital land records to climate finance with gender safeguards

Digital land administration can help Ethiopia access and govern climate finance. Land restoration, carbon sequestration, rangeland management, watershed investments, and sustainable land management require clarity over rights, restrictions, and benefit sharing. Recent climate finance for Ethiopia's nature and land restoration agenda indicates the scale of opportunity: a 2024 Climate Investment Funds-backed package was reported at about US\$500 million, including support for restoring more than 320,000 ha of forests, farmlands, and rangelands and for creating an online forest registry (Reuters, 2024).

Climate-linked land investments should not treat the household or community as gender-neutral. Project rules should identify women rights holders, pastoral women, widows, female-headed households, women's cooperatives, and women users of communal resources. Benefit-sharing rules should allocate direct or joint benefits to women, and restrictions on grazing, fuelwood, forest access, or land use should be assessed for gendered labor and livelihood impacts. NRLAIS and landscape information systems can support this by collecting sex-disaggregated data on rights and benefits.

Pilot gender-responsive communal certification in pastoral areas

The pastoral provisions in Proclamation No. 1324/2024 create an opportunity to pilot communal certification that respects mobility while protecting women. A strong pilot should map communal grazing areas, water points, corridors, and drought reserves; document customary institutions and user groups; identify women's rights and resource uses; require women's representation in communal governance bodies; record rules on benefit sharing and dispute resolution; and include safeguards against elite capture, involuntary privatization, and exclusion of widows, divorced women, youth, and poorer households.

Investment priorities and implementation practices

The following investment priorities are proposed to convert Ethiopia's formal certification gains into practical, gender-equitable and climate-resilient land tenure outcomes.

Table 4: Recommended investment priorities

Priority	Rationale	Indicative activities	Suggested results indicators
1. Registry maintenance and transaction updating	Initial certification is strong, but rights will decay if transactions are not updated.	Support woreda service standards, mobile update days, digital/paper reconciliation, affordable fee policy, staff training, data quality audits, and customer feedback.	Percentage of transactions updated within service standard; percentage of women updating rights; reduction in informal/unrecorded transactions; number of functional NRLAIS woredas maintained.
2. Regional legal harmonization following Proclamation No. 1324/2024	Federal reform requires regional alignment to be implementable.	Legal gap analysis; model regional amendments; practice notes on spousal consent, polygamous unions, and communal certification; training for regional bureaus and LACs.	Number of regional instruments reviewed/amended; number of officials trained; adoption of standard forms protecting women and joint holders.
3. Women's effective land-rights package	Certificates alone do not guarantee control, benefits, or productivity.	Legal literacy, certificate custody campaigns, LAC/elder training, service days for spouse registration, labor-saving technologies, women-focused extension, and plot-management support.	Women reporting participation in crop, rental, collateral, and compensation decisions; female-managed plot productivity; women holding certificate copies; women using land services.
4. Gender-safe SLLC-linked finance	Credit products can empower women or expose them to risk if consent and monitoring are weak.	Consent protocols; MFI training; sex-disaggregated borrower/co-borrower data; risk disclosure; grievance mechanisms; and product design for women borrowers.	Percentage of SLLC-linked loans with verified joint consent; share of women borrowers/co-borrowers; repayment and enforcement data by sex; women's satisfaction and grievance outcomes.
5. Land justice and legal empowerment	Land disputes are frequent, costly, and often mediated by forums that may disadvantage women.	Kebele legal literacy; paralegal/referral model adapted to Ethiopia; women's affairs representation pathways; customary-formal dispute resolution protocols.	Women's legal knowledge scores; disputes resolved within time standard; women represented in land disputes; reduced cost and time of dispute resolution.
6. Gender-responsive pastoral communal certification	Pastoral tenure needs flexible communal recognition, not highland-style individualization.	Pilot communal mapping and certification; women's representation rules; benefit-sharing rules; safeguards for widows, divorced women, and female-headed households.	Communal certificates issued; women represented in governance bodies; women's resource-use rights recorded; pastoral disputes reduced.
7. Land rights and climate finance integration	Climate investments require clear rights and gender-equitable benefit sharing.	Integration of NRLAIS and climate data; gender indicators for restoration/carbon projects; benefit-sharing templates; social safeguards and grievance systems.	Women receiving direct/joint climate benefits; hectares restored with rights verified; grievances resolved; gender-disaggregated benefit and restriction data.

Implementation principles

1. Move from counting certificates to measuring rights functionality. Indicators should measure whether rights are updated, understood, enforceable, productive, and beneficial for women and vulnerable groups.
2. Treat women as rights holders, not just household members. All services, financial products, compensation processes, and climate benefits should identify women as named, consenting, and benefiting rights holders.
3. Do not individualize pastoral tenure by default. Communal certification should protect mobility, customary governance, and women's resource-use rights.
4. Make regional alignment a delivery issue. Federal legal reform should be translated into regional laws, operational manuals, forms, LAC training, and service standards.
5. Use evidence and learning loops. Every pilot should include baseline data, sex-disaggregated monitoring, practical learning questions, and adaptive management.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's land tenure system has undergone a profound transformation. It has moved from widespread tenure insecurity and fears of redistribution toward a formalized system in which millions of rural households hold state-recognized land rights. Proclamation No. 1324/2024 and the continuing rollout and maintenance of SLLC and NRLAIS create a strong platform for secure tenure, women's land rights, agricultural productivity, and climate-resilient land governance.

However, formalization is necessary but not sufficient. The most important implementation gap is between recognized rights and usable rights. For women, this gap appears in certificate custody, spousal consent, the impact of divorce, inheritance, and polygamous unions, access to justice and to credit, labor constraints, plot-level productivity, and participation in land governance. For pastoral communities, it appears in the tension between flexible communal systems and fixed administrative models. For peri-urban households, it appears in compensation, conversion, and livelihood-restoration risks. For the national system, it appears in whether NRLAIS lives on and continues to be updated after project support ends.

Development partner support can add value by helping Ethiopia to shift its focus on land-use rights from the first-generation achievement of mass certification to a second-generation agenda of rights quality, rights maintenance, gender transformation, and climate-linked tenure security. This means supporting practical, measurable reforms that make land rights more enforceable, productive, gender-equitable, and resilient.

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