

Securing Land, Reducing Inequalities: Women's Rights and Inclusive Land Governance in the Mekong Region

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SUMMARY

Secure land rights are fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to reducing inequalities, gender equity, poverty alleviation, and sustainable livelihoods. This paper examines women's access to land and land tenure security across the Mekong region (specifically Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam), with a particular focus on ethnic minority and rural women, who remain among the most disadvantaged despite seemingly progressive legal frameworks. Drawing from recent gender and land governance studies and publication *Gender Outlook*, edited by Elizabeth Daley, the paper explores how social norms, structural inequalities, and institutional weaknesses continue to undermine women's land rights, and highlights pathways for fostering a more inclusive future in land governance and the surveying profession.

The study aimed to analyse the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and land governance to better understand the barriers women face in accessing and securing land. This paper draws out the implications for surveyors, land professionals, and policymakers in shaping inclusive systems that advance SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and ensure equitable access to land and resources.

Findings show that while statutory frameworks prohibit gender discrimination, they are often "gender blind," failing to address entrenched social norms and customary practices that restrict women's rights. Barriers include patrilineal inheritance, unequal access to education and resources, the high costs of land titling, and the underrepresentation of women in land governance bodies. Participation gaps are evident, with women and youth—with compounded disadvantages for ethnic minority women—largely excluded from decision-making in community and local land governance

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bodies.

However, the research also identified positive practices, such as matrilineal inheritance systems in some Lao and Vietnamese communities, and community forestry initiatives in Cambodia where women actively manage resources.

Women's access to land in the Mekong region is not simply a question of legal reform but requires a multidimensional approach that addresses entrenched social norms, enhances women's representation in governance, and closes the gap between policy and practice. For the surveying profession, this demands new approaches to education, training, and participation that integrate gender and social inclusion principles. Strengthening women's land rights and participation not only advances equity but also improves the effectiveness and sustainability of land governance systems.

This paper contributes to the FIG 2026 sub-theme on Evolutionary Diversity and Inclusion by highlighting how fostering youth, gender equity, and capacity development within the surveying profession can directly support SDGs 1, 2, 5, 10, 15, 16. Surveyors, as custodians of land information and facilitators of land governance, play a pivotal role in reducing inequalities. The insights and recommendations from this work aim to inspire the next generation of surveyors to embrace inclusivity as both a professional and ethical imperative, thereby contributing to “the future we want”—one where secure land rights are equitably realised for all.