

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

**Renée CHARTRES, Senior Land and Legal Specialist at Land Equity International, Australia. Text extracted from Elizabeth DALEY, Natalie Y. CAMPBELL and Jessica LOWRY, MRLG Publication 'Outlook on Gender and Land in the Mekong Region' (Vientiane, January 2024).**

**Key words:** Gender, Mekong Region, Discrimination

## 1. 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 the publication *Outlook on Gender in the Mekong Region*, written by Elizabeth Daley, Natalie Y. Campbell and Jessica Lowy, 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 in the Mekong.

The *Outlook on Gender* study analyzed 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 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.

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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 realized for all.

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## 1. REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The Mekong Region consists of Vietnam, Myanmar, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Cambodia and Thailand. While political and economic systems vary across the Mekong region, many gender issues are broadly similar, and ethnic minority women are often the group most discriminated against. The studies conducted to support this work did not include Thailand, thus it is not included in this overview.

With regard to the **policy and legal framework**, in general the region, vis-à-vis other regions, has very few specifically discriminatory laws. All four countries have committed to gender equality by becoming parties to the CEDAW and developing national gender policies. However, in all countries the laws relating to land have been criticized for being 'gender blind' which means that in practice, due to discriminatory social norms and structural barriers, they do not translate to the achievement of equality in access to, use and ownership of land. Among the four countries, Vietnam goes the furthest in its constitutional and legislative requirements and protections for gender equality, including in relation to land and natural resources.

Despite the predominately gender equal legal context, **the socio-cultural context** provides barriers to women's access to and ownership of land. As is discussed in further detail below, in Cambodia and Lao PDR these include women's limited access to education, unequal participation in decision-making and leadership, and traditional norms and beliefs that make it hard for women to claim their rights despite supportive laws. Gender biases and persistent male chauvinism were also cited at a Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project workshop in 2023 as a key feature in Vietnam, with participants noting that there is a lack of understanding among women about their rights, and a range of gender inequalities at work and in decision-making at work and at home. Cultural concerns were also noted in Myanmar, where the 2023 workshop participants further noted that there is a need to recognise women's rights without excluding discussions about men's vulnerabilities – making sure that gender is not just equated with women.

**With regard to land and gender institutions**, at the national level, all four countries have women-focused institutions that broadly address gender equality issues. However, it is unclear the extent to which these institutions, and the policy-making domain in general in the Mekong region, prioritize women's land rights. Structures such as the Lao Women's Union

(LWU) in Lao PDR and the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) in Vietnam are relevant when reflecting on the broader incorporation of gender equity into policies, legislation, and practice in the different countries. However, **sectors responsible for land often do not have a gender mandate**. A MRLG 2024 report on women's participation in land governance covering Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam noted that women are greatly underrepresented in the land sector (*NB*: Myanmar was not covered in this report).

With respect to issues of **participation and representation** in local government and especially within the institutions of land governance and land administration, there are significant differences across the region and within countries, with in some cases, strong women's participation in forest management institutions. Across the region, differences between women themselves are an important mediating factor in how women exercise their rights in practice within local land management in their different communities, with participation of women dependent on ethnicity, wealth, and education. Further country-specific details are provided below.

## 2. NATIONAL ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Lao PDR

Over the past few decades, Lao PDR has undergone substantial processes of rural transformation and developed new land management policies to guide systematic land titling. The estimated national land use in Lao PDR in 2018 included 67.9% forest and 10.6% agricultural land. Over 70% of Laotians depend directly or indirectly for their livelihoods on agriculture and forestry. In 2020 more men (55%) than women (48%) perceived themselves to have secure tenure, with higher rates of women reporting that they either did not know or refusing to answer the question posed.

In terms of **legal discrimination**, there is limited evidence of direct gender discrimination in Lao PDR's legal system as it concerns access to and rights over land. Instead, gender-blind legislation is the norm in Lao PDR, where the Lao language does not distinguish between genders in its use of pronouns. The Lao PDR Constitution explicitly promotes gender equality. It specifically mandates the provision of education and opportunities for women, including those (mainly ethnic minorities) living in remote areas. It also guarantees equality before the law regardless of sex and states that both genders enjoy equal rights in political, economic, cultural, and social fields and in family affairs and protects the property rights and inheritance of all individuals. It requires a 'women advancement policy' to be implemented to protect the legitimate rights and benefits of mothers and children (leaving limited protections to childless women).

In terms of laws influencing rights to land, in Lao PDR, most assets acquired by a legally married couple during their marriage are considered as 'matrimonial property', defined in the 1990 Property Law as 'the assets acquired by a married couple during their marriage, except for personal items of low value and items for personal use such as clothing'. This law further stipulates that husband and wife have equal rights over matrimonial property regardless of who actually acquired the asset. However, assets belonging to the husband or wife prior to their marriage, or received through inheritance, or granted specifically to the husband or wife during their marriage, shall not be considered to be matrimonial property. Under the 2005

Law on Heritage and Basis of Inheritance, the surviving spouse receives only a share of the deceased's property alongside any surviving children. Where there is no written will, the 2008 Law on Inheritance specifies that only 25% of a deceased person's individual assets pass directly to their spouse while the rest is left to their children. The surviving spouse receives half of any matrimonial property (joint assets), with the rest divided equally among the children. This means that they legally inherit only 'their' half of any matrimonial property, while the deceased's half goes entirely to the children. No distinction is made between male or female children, but, in practice, in Lao PDR, inheritance is influenced by customs and family traditions within a diverse range of patrilineal and matrilineal systems. There is no right for the surviving spouse to stay in the matrimonial home. These legal provisions often impact women's access to, and ownership of land.

With regard to **social norms**, the Lao government officially recognises 50 ethnic groups with 160 ethnic subgroups, although the total number of ethnic groups may be over 200. In 2015 some 53% of Lao PDR's total population was estimated to come from the majority Lao Loum ethnic group, with other large groups being the Khmou (11%) and the Hmong (9%). Women's land rights in Lao PDR are therefore closely linked to customary tenure arrangements and inheritance practices, many of which are matrilineal, and are framed within customary gendered social norms. Lao inheritance practices vary widely across provinces and villages and usually reflect the customs of the predominant ethnic group in the village. One 2020 study identified matrilineal ethnic Lao-Tai and partly matrilineal ethnic Bru/Makong villages to be places where 'the customary inheritance and rights of women are continued and maintained'. However, there are many more patrilineal and bilineal villages where this is not the case.

Separately, the costs of increasing formalization of tenure have fallen largely on women, poor households and the ethnic minorities that make up nearly 40% of the population. This disproportionate impact is largely due to **economic barriers**, inadequate education and discriminatory traditions, as these vulnerable groups either lack knowledge and skills to secure their land, and/or cannot afford the associated fees. For example, the titling process relies on villagers already having a basic certificate of acquisition or land certificate which women in particular may not have. The high cost of adjudication and issuing of land titles is also a barrier to individual land titling for rural and ethnic minority women, as well as women-headed households.

With regards to the **institutional set-up and women's participation in land governance**, in Lao PDR, a recent report concludes that '...the vast majority of official positions, especially at high-ranking levels, are occupied by men', which adds to a lack of 'voices within government to advance women's rights to land'. Critics also note that the Lao Women's Union (LWU), while powerful, does not adequately reflect the needs and interests of ordinary women, nor does it have an intersectional understanding of gender. On the other hand, the existence of a government structure such as the LWU which is devoted to women's advancement, and which operate at different tiers of government, is a very useful potential mechanism to promote women's land rights and access to natural resources.

At the local level, it is reported that ethnic minority women in Lao PDR often take part in land use decision-making at the household level, but in general, and compared with ethnic

majority women, they tend to be under-represented in community-level decision-making structures, such as the Village Agriculture and Forestry Subunit (VAFSU). This finding conflicts with another study of VAFSUs, which found, to the contrary that women in the ethnic minority village were *more* involved in their VAFSU than their sisters in the ethnic majority village were. This was because of the greater incentive to participate that arose from the ethnic minority women's greater reliance on local natural resources for their livelihoods. At the same time, the study also found that younger people, and girls in particular, hardly participated at all in local land and forest management in either village.

## 2.2 Myanmar

Myanmar's political landscape has undergone rapid recent change as a result of the coup and consequent civil conflict, prompting policy shifts in the recognition of women's, indigenous and rural land rights. Key issues for women's land rights in Myanmar include shifting priorities and inconsistencies in the application and implementation of policies and written laws, as well as the impacts of current *de facto* land grabs, internal conflict, and past land expropriation.

In regard to the **legal and policy framework**, Myanmar's 2008 Constitution explicitly forbids discrimination against any citizen based on sex and guarantees equality to all citizens. The Myanmar Constitution guarantees care for mothers and children, thereby also conflating women and mothers, with its problematic implications for the property (and other) rights of all women who are not mothers. While statutory family law exists in Myanmar, it does not apply to most women. This has complex implications for gender equity and women's rights. The rights to own, manage and control property of the 90% of married women living within Buddhist or Muslim marriages are governed by religious laws. These take precedence over statutory law.

With Buddhism ascribed to by most of Myanmar's population, this means that Buddhist law and practices determine the vast majority of marriage, inheritance, and property matters, and the formal legal framework of family law applies only to around one-tenth of marriages. Buddhist law and custom is not codified in statute in Myanmar. Under the 1898 Burma Laws Act, the courts decide which religious laws to apply according to what religion the parties practice; where parties are not religious, the courts should apply principles of 'justice, equity and good conscience'. Under the 1925 Succession Act, relevant (religious) customary division of property upon marriage applies, but in all other circumstances marriage does not create any interest in the property of the other spouse. In those few cases not governed by religious law, the earnings and property of a married woman are considered her separate property under the 1874 Married Women's Property Act. However, it is often difficult to determine the applicable law in a pluralistic legal system such as that of Myanmar, as religious laws may not be clear about whether individual property brought to a marriage by each spouse is held jointly within the marriage, or whether property acquired during the marriage by either spouse, individually, is to be considered as joint property.

The legal framework intersects with **discriminatory social norms** whereby traditional and religious institutions generally do not encourage gender equality and the participation of women in land governance, especially in rural and ethnic minority areas. In most ethnic minority areas, the customary practices tend to be strongly patriarchal. However, whether or

not there is legal pluralism, rather than dominance by one type of law - usually religious or customary - varies significantly by area, and it depends on the extent to which government institutions reach down to local communities, even within areas of the country dominated by the majority Bamar ethnic group. Within Bamar society, customary law is usually associated with *dhammatat*, or Buddhist law on marriage and the family; within ethnic minority areas customary law may or may not be religious law as well.

In ethnic minority areas, including those controlled by non-state ethnic armed organisations, there is often widespread distrust of government institutions, reliance on local ‘big men’ and difficulties in accessing statutory legal protections and institutions, which are often not present nor operational at all. There is a corresponding low level of awareness about the statutory system, lack of trust in it, and limited awareness of legal aid services. Formal court processes are expensive and involve travel and time costs. Laws are written in the majority language which most ethnic minority people do not understand. Similar issues to the remote rural areas also arise for people living in camps for internally displaced people. This environment, combined with often discriminatory local customs function to undermine women’s assertion of land rights in the law.

Two recent case studies focusing on indigenous women’s knowledge, roles, decision-making and land ownership under customary tenure arrangements in heavily forested areas of Myanmar - Nagaland and Kachin State - shed useful light on the current situation around women’s land rights in Myanmar and **the impact of social norms and economic barriers on such rights**. Common challenges for women uncovered in the report include lack of access to forests, lack of information about their rights and lack of participation in community decision-making. The report found that women’s customary rights to access, use and manage forest resources are weak, as are their customary inheritance rights. Despite women taking on greater responsibility in generating income from non-timber forest products (NTFPs), the studies found men reluctant to recognise women’s role in land management or their right to be involved in its governance.

In Nagaland, in particular, **gendered social norms remain very strong**; men are seen as the custodians of tribal property and women as economically dependent on men. Unequal gender divisions of labour go unquestioned, only men are formally educated, and women only occasionally attend community meetings to represent their households when their husbands are not available. Most women and men interviewed in these studies acknowledged women’s important role in all aspects of family livelihoods and reported that they take part in household decision-making. Yet women’s detailed local knowledge cannot directly input into community decision-making without the opportunity to participate meaningfully in land and natural resource governance.

In 2018, women completed 11 years of schooling on average against men’s 10, and, in 2020, women outnumbered men in educational achievement at all levels. However, this has not translated into political influence, with women occupying just 12.9% of directly elected parliamentary seats in 2016. Without broader political influence, the chance of women being able to influence land-related policy-making and wider land governance at all levels is slim. In terms of **participation in local land governance**, in Myanmar, the 2016 National Land Use Policy (NLUP) stipulates that committees of the proposed national land use councils shall

consist of representatives from all ethnic nationalities, experts, women, and elders, but sets no specific quotas to ensure either any minimum level of representation or meaningful and effective participation. A 2017 study, citing evidence from 2014, describes how: ‘In workshops, women explained that local administrative offices, including survey departments and courthouses, were male domains. Their testimonies are echoed in statistics: in the General Administrative Department, the face of government in rural Myanmar, 17 of 15,972 ward/village tract administrators are female, and there are no female administrators for the country’s 330 townships.’ Low participation in land governance has implications for women’s willingness to enforce their land rights but also in their ability to ensure land management positively impacts themselves and their families.

### 2.3 Cambodia

In Cambodia, some 90% of poor people live in rural areas and most farmers are small landholders working on less than 2 hectares. Landlessness has long been a defining factor for poverty and is increasing by roughly 2% per year, with some 45% of all rural households already landless or near landless, with either no land at all or with plots under 0.5ha. Women are 52% of the rural population and their participation rate in agriculture and food production, which dominate the Cambodian economy, is 80%. Women make up over half of the labour force in both subsistence and commercial farming and more than 65% of rural women are farmers. Although most landholdings are held and farmed jointly, single women’s landholdings (especially those of widows) are often significantly smaller or less fertile than those held by men. Recent research indicates that women’s workloads, especially those of indigenous women, are more negatively impacted than men’s by the agrarian transition in Cambodia, given the ‘predominant roles’ men have taken in commercial transactions and interactions with outsiders.

In Cambodia there are no prominent **legal barriers** to women’s access and ownership of land, but there are gaps – including the fact that the law does not cover customary marriages. Positively, the Civil Code grants equal rights to use, benefit from and jointly manage common property to both spouses in a legally registered marriage. Common property is defined as all property acquired during marriage, and the property each spouse held before marriage does not automatically become part of the common property. A legally married couple have equal rights to use and manage joint properties – and their sale or disposal without the consent of both spouses is forbidden – but they also specifically retain their individual interests in their own properties under the 1989 Law on the Marriage and Family.

There are extra protections for the right to use (inhabit) the matrimonial home: even where it is separate rather than joint property, the non-owning spouse must be asked permission for it to be sold, leased or mortgaged, and he or she may continue to live in the house if they do not agree to the sale. As noted above, these laws are silent, however, with respect to the rights of unmarried couples in customary (unregistered) marriages, leaving them without the same protections and thus more vulnerable to property loss and landlessness.

Inheritance rights in Cambodia are governed either by testament (a written will) or by priorities laid out in statute when there is no will. In cases of inheritance, the Civil Code provides for the spouse, children, and parents of the deceased to inherit in equal shares. The deceased’s spouse does not automatically gain full lifetime user rights to all – or even any –

of the deceased's land - they need the consent of all surviving children and their parents-in-law. This can be problematic if they do not have the support of these other family members, for example, if some family members are using some of the deceased's land themselves. Spouses – especially widows – may succumb to gendered social norms and pressures to give up their claims entirely, even to their matrimonial home, although in theory they may also hold up division of the property to all the other heirs by withholding their own consent.

Indeed, **social norms**, evidenced in the *Chbab Srey*, or Women's Code of Conduct, and *Chbab Prohh*, or Men's Code of Conduct, still hold much influence in Cambodia, despite the influences of agrarian transitions in reshaping gendered divisions of labour and increasing rural women's autonomy as they move increasingly into wage work. While some studies have indicated that the *Chbab Srey* does not necessarily affect women's engagement in politics, it does reinforce traditional norms and the obligations women have on a day-to-day basis to their husbands and families. Alongside other cultural factors and **economic barriers**, this may create unequal domestic power relations and position women in subordinate positions within their households. In turn, this can prevent women's autonomy in the use and enjoyment of their land as well as their access to land and to information about how to claim their land rights. These customary codes of conduct can normalise male superiority and promote women's passivity, not only tending to uphold discriminatory stereotypes but also potentially legitimising gender-based violence. As a result, the CEDAW Committee has recommended references to the *Chbab Srey* be eliminated within education, and widespread gender sensitisation to be promoted in the media.

In regard to **participation in land governance and policy consultation**, in Cambodia, there are no specific quotas for the appointment of women in land management and administration committees nor quotas for the appointment of women in land dispute resolution committees such as Commune Dispute Resolution Committees and *Maisons de la Justice* which operate at the subnational commune and district levels. This is despite the fact that politicians have begun discussing the general role of women in politics and leadership roles.

Recent evidence suggests that some women are actively involved in land management within designated Community Forests. A study concerning a Community Protected Area (CPA) in Kampong Thom province highlighted that local *perceptions* were of equal access, control and use of farm and housing assets, but changing gender roles and divisions of labour within households were creating dissimilar rights to different parts of the forest. Men and women's land management and conservation practices were found to differ according to their own knowledge and methods of using the forest's resources. Those interviewed expressed support for social inclusiveness and equitable participation in land governance, but the CPA's Committee had very few women members partly because only 30% of women in the community could read and write.

## 2.4 Vietnam

In Vietnam, the Doi Moi reforms in the late 1980s led to large-scale market changes, and policy now focuses on investment and efficiency. This presents risks for small-scale landowners and family farmers, of whom 54% live below the national poverty line: the accumulation of large land areas for agribusiness and intensive monocropping might exclude vulnerable groups from their often highly fragmented land resources if their land management

needs are not put first by policy makers. At the same time, Vietnam is rapidly urbanising. The urban population was 39.5% of the total population by the start of 2023, with population shifting from rural to urban areas at an annual rate of 2.7%.

Some 43% of Vietnam's 104 million population were engaged in agriculture, and average farm size is one third that of Cambodia. Vietnam's 53 ethnic minority groups live mostly in the mountainous regions that comprise almost three quarters of the country's land, and their monthly income per capita is less than half the national average. Some 83.8% of ethnic minority women work in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, mostly self-employed due to low levels of technical qualifications.

Relevantly, the gender gap in access to land titles is not only notable but is much worse in urban than it is in rural areas. Among all of those who have Land Use Rights Certificates (LURC), overall, 13% more men than women have their names recorded on them. However, in urban areas the difference between them is only 5.8% more men than women; in rural areas, the difference is 19% more men than women who have their names recorded on LURC.

In terms of **the legal and policy framework**, on paper, Vietnam is a regional leader in gender-equitable law. As in Myanmar, Vietnam's 1992 Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex, stipulating that 'male and female citizens shall have equal rights in all fields'. It also prohibits all acts of ethnic discrimination and division. These two aspects of gender equality promotion and anti-discrimination were strengthened in constitutional amendments undertaken in 2013, but there is no constitutional recognition of customary or religious laws and there are no provisions directly ensuring that non-discrimination principles supersede such laws. The Vietnamese Constitution also supports special measures for 'the comprehensive development of women and promotion of their role in society'.

Gender equality in property rights within marriage and on inheritance is generally robust in Vietnam's legal framework. However, the issue of concern here is the practical reality for ethnic minority women. The Vietnamese Civil Code sets out equality in all civil relations and forbids the use of 'differences regarding ethnicity, gender, social class, economic situation, belief, religion, educational level and occupation as reasons to treat each other unequally'. This is supported by the constitutional provisions that place men and women equally in their right to own and use property, although these rights are not always fully observed in the case of ethnic minority people and vary according to whether the ethnic group follows matrilineal or patrilineal inheritance practices.

Land acquired during marriage is considered to be common property across Vietnam, and a 2013 amendment to the 2003 Land Law specifically requires the names of both husband and wife to be listed on the Land Use Rights Certificate when land is formally titled. Women's right to inheritance is also equal to that of men in statutory law.

In relation to **social norms** and **socio-economic barriers**, reports indicate gender biases and persistent male chauvinism are said to feature widely in Vietnam, alongside a lack of understanding among women about their rights, and a range of gender inequalities at work and in decision-making at work and at home. In practice, among people in rural areas or ethnic people, when their daughters get married, in most of the cases, they cannot inherit the properties of their parents. The situation in ethnic minority areas in Vietnam is very similar to

Lao PDR, and women's relative lack of knowledge about their statutory inheritance rights is a key barrier to gender equality. According to one recent study, the preference of sons in inheritance practices and divorced women being unable to acquire LURCs are two of the key reasons for discrepancies in women's land rights between what is protected in statutory law and what takes place under customary practices. Barriers to women's tenure rights in ethnic minority areas of Vietnam are exacerbated by a common lack of knowledge and awareness of rights granted by the formal legal system. According to one study, this is 'often linked to traditional gender roles and representations, such as the belief that only men have a place in public life or that men are better at solving problems or doing paperwork'. In one area, Hung Yen, only 40% of men and 37% of women knew that, according to statutory law, widows do not lose land they inherited from a deceased husband if they subsequently remarry, while in the Long An area the figures were 46% of men and 33% of women.

In terms of **participation in land governance** while women do participate in land governance, there is poor involvement among ethnic minority women across all local government institutions in Vietnam. There is a major discrepancy in the representation of ethnic minority women compared with that of ethnic minority men within the Vietnamese civil service, and, ethnic minority women in the Vietnamese civil service were more likely to have clerical, administrative and finance-related roles than key leadership positions. This is a reminder of the importance of looking at gender in relation to women's representation and participation in land governance and land management at all levels as an intersectional issue, linked inextricably to broader power dynamics those who do not participate in land policy-making and legal-drafting processes may not have their voices heard or their needs met in the resulting policies and laws.

### 3. GOOD PRACTICES AND REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Outlook on Gender makes several recommendations for improving women's ownership and access to land. Four of these recommendations are highlighted as particularly critical:

1. **Ethnic Minorities and Indigenous Rights:** Across the region, many marginalised people are from indigenous or ethnic minority groups; often these are also the most vulnerable people, and women tend to be the most disadvantaged among them. It is recommended that administrative and procedural approaches to land governance need to systematically address the vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities, especially ethnic minority women.
2. **Policy-implementation Gaps:** Many policies across the region, where implemented effectively, would support gender equity in land governance. However, there is a large gap between these policies and their implementation in practice. All four Mekong countries that are the focus of this Outlook face varying levels of technical and resourcing (in)capacity to implement policies and laws. It is recommended that the everyday operational and procedural details of how, and by whom, laws and policies are implemented is what matters. Coordination among development partners is needed to avoid duplication of effort and promote synergies.
3. **Participatory Land Governance:** Local land governance is crucial, including the need to embed gender-equitable community participation in the processes and

institutions of land management at local levels. It is recommended that accountability mechanisms are needed and must be enforced. Training, capacity building and gender sensitisation initiatives are needed to enable effective and participatory land governance that is not just representative of local elites.

4. **Gendered Social Norms:** Gender-related values, practices, belief systems, and traditions are often deeply-rooted norms that develop slowly over time. These may attenuate legal efforts to ensure gender equity with respect to land. Changing social norms, though inevitably complex, is possible. It is recommended that civil society and government can work together with local champions of change, both women and men, to promote gender-equitable values. Development partners can help with funds and technical support.

## REFERENCES

All references for this study can be found in the MRLG Publication 'Outlook on Gender and Land in the Mekong Region' (Vientiane, January 2024).

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Website for Outlook on Gender and Land in the Mekong Region report:

<https://www.mrlg.org/publications/outlook-on-gender-and-land-in-the-mekong-region/>