International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research (IJAMR)
ISSN: 2643-9670
Vol. 10 Issue 5 May - 2026, Pages: 343-346

Land Acquisition Practices and Women's Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Critical Review and Research Agenda for Lira District, Northern Uganda

Jennifer Angwech

Kampala International University

***Abstract**: This article critically reviews literature on land acquisition practices and women's livelihoods across Sub-Saharan Africa, with particular emphasis on Uganda and Northern Uganda. The review examines how customary land acquisition, individual land purchase, and leasehold arrangements shape women's food security, economic security, and decision-making power. The study is guided by Property Rights Theory developed by Harold Demsetz in 1967 and Feminist Theory advanced by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949. The review demonstrates that despite women's central role in agricultural production and household welfare, patriarchal land tenure systems continue to restrict their ownership, control, and use of land resources (FAO, 2023; UN Women, 2023). Evidence from Africa and Uganda further shows that insecure land rights, weak enforcement of land laws, land grabbing, poverty, and limited financial inclusion continue to undermine women's livelihoods. However, there remains limited empirical evidence specifically examining how different land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods in Lira District, Northern Uganda. The article therefore identifies a major research gap and proposes a future research agenda for Lira District to generate localized evidence capable of informing gender-responsive land governance and women's empowerment policies.*

Keywords: Land acquisition practices, women's livelihoods, customary tenure, leasehold, land purchase, gender, Northern Uganda, Lira District.

1. Introduction

Land remains one of the most important productive assets in Sub-Saharan Africa because it supports agriculture, food production, employment, income generation, and social identity (FAO, 2023). In many African societies, livelihoods are directly dependent on access to and control over land resources. Women contribute significantly to agricultural production and household food security, particularly in rural communities where subsistence farming remains the dominant economic activity (UN Women, 2023). Despite their substantial contribution to food production and household welfare, women continue to experience major inequalities in accessing and controlling land resources.

Across Africa, customary land tenure systems remain dominant in many rural areas. Although these systems provide social identity and communal ownership structures, they often privilege men while marginalizing women from inheritance, ownership, and land-related decision-making (Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020). Women in many African countries access land primarily through male relatives such as husbands, fathers, brothers, or clan leaders. Consequently, women's land rights remain insecure, especially in cases of widowhood, divorce, or family disputes.

In Uganda, women form the backbone of rural agriculture and household food production. However, their access to land remains constrained by customary inheritance systems, land conflicts, commercialization of land, and socio-economic inequalities (World Bank, 2024). Northern Uganda presents a particularly important context because the region experienced prolonged armed conflict, displacement, and post-conflict land disputes that continue to shape land governance systems and women's livelihood security. Although scholars have extensively examined gender and land rights broadly in Uganda, there is still limited empirical evidence specifically examining how different land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods in Lira District. This article therefore synthesizes existing literature from Africa, East Africa, Uganda, and Northern Uganda while identifying critical gaps that justify future empirical research in Lira District.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Property Rights Theory

Property Rights Theory was developed by Harold Demsetz in 1967. The theory explains that clearly defined and enforceable property rights encourage investment, economic productivity, and efficient utilization of resources (Demsetz, 1967). According to the theory, individuals are more likely to invest in land, improve productivity, and engage in long-term development activities when they possess secure ownership and control over land resources. The theory is highly relevant to this study because it provides an institutional explanation of how secure land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods. Women who possess secure land rights are

more likely to invest in agriculture, adopt modern farming techniques, access credit, and improve household food production. Secure tenure also increases women's ability to participate in household decision-making and economic activities.

However, critics of the theory argue that secure legal rights alone may not automatically translate into empowerment for women in patriarchal societies where cultural norms continue to restrict women's control over productive resources. Despite this limitation, Property Rights Theory remains important because it explains the economic significance of land tenure security in shaping livelihood outcomes.

2.2 Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory was advanced by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 through her influential work 'The Second Sex'. The theory explains that gender inequalities are socially constructed through patriarchal systems that privilege men while marginalizing women from access to power, resources, and opportunities (de Beauvoir, 1949).
Feminist Theory is important to this study because it explains why women continue to experience discrimination in accessing and controlling land resources despite legal reforms promoting gender equality. The theory highlights how patriarchal inheritance systems, cultural norms, and unequal power relations continue to undermine women's ownership of land and participation in land-related decision-making processes.

The theory further explains that women's livelihoods are shaped not only by access to land but also by their ability to exercise control and authority over land resources. Feminist Theory therefore provides a gender-sensitive explanation of why women remain vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, and economic dependency in many African societies.

The integration of Property Rights Theory and Feminist Theory provides a comprehensive understanding of how land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods. While Property Rights Theory explains the importance of tenure security for economic productivity and investment, Feminist Theory explains the social and cultural inequalities that shape women's access to land and livelihood opportunities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Customary Land Acquisition and Women's Livelihoods

Customary land tenure systems remain dominant in many African countries, especially within rural communities where land is collectively controlled by clans, families, and traditional authorities (FAO, 2023). Under these systems, land ownership and inheritance are often governed by patriarchal cultural norms that privilege men while limiting women's direct ownership rights.

Studies from Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Uganda indicate that women under customary tenure frequently access land through marriage or male relatives rather than through independent ownership (Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020). This arrangement creates insecure tenure, especially for widows, divorced women, and female-headed households who may lose access to land after the death of a husband or family disputes.
Research further demonstrates that insecure customary tenure discourages long-term agricultural investment because women may fear eviction or loss of land rights. Insecure land rights also limit women's ability to access credit and agricultural extension services because financial institutions often require formal proof of ownership before issuing loans (UN Women, 2023).

Although many African governments have introduced legal reforms promoting women's land rights, scholars argue that patriarchal inheritance systems and customary practices continue to undermine women's effective control over land resources. Consequently, women remain vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, and economic dependency despite their central role in agricultural production.

3.2 Individual Land Purchase and Women's Livelihoods

Individual land purchase has increasingly emerged as an alternative pathway through which women attempt to secure independent ownership of land outside customary systems. Studies from East Africa indicate that women who independently purchase land often experience stronger economic security, improved bargaining power within households, and greater participation in decision-making processes (World Bank, 2024).

Women who own land independently are more likely to engage in commercial agriculture, invest in long-term agricultural activities, and diversify household income sources. Secure land ownership also improves women's confidence and social status within communities.

However, women's participation in formal land markets remains constrained by poverty, limited education levels, weak financial

inclusion, and discriminatory social norms. Many women lack access to credit facilities and savings opportunities necessary for purchasing land. Research also shows that women are less likely than men to possess registered land titles because of the high costs associated with land transactions and legal registration procedures (FAO, 2023).

As a result, although individual land purchase provides opportunities for improving women's livelihoods, many rural women remain excluded from formal land markets.

3.3 Leasehold Land Acquisition and Women's Livelihoods

Leasehold land acquisition refers to temporary access to land through formal agreements between landowners and tenants. Leasehold arrangements have become increasingly common due to urbanization, land commercialization, and rising population pressure in many African countries (UN Women, 2023).

Some studies suggest that leasehold systems improve women's access to productive land where outright ownership is difficult to achieve. Women under leasehold arrangements may engage in agriculture, small-scale farming, and income-generating activities without requiring large financial capital for land purchase.

However, leasehold systems also present significant challenges. Short lease durations, insecure tenancy agreements, fluctuating rental costs, and fear of eviction discourage women from making long-term investments in land development and sustainable agriculture (World Bank, 2024). Women under leasehold systems may therefore remain economically vulnerable despite temporary access to land.

4. Research Gap and Justification for Lira District

Existing literature provides substantial evidence regarding gender inequalities in land ownership across Africa and Uganda. However, most studies broadly focus on national land governance systems, legal reforms, and customary tenure arrangements without specifically examining how different land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods in post-conflict peri-urban contexts.

Importantly, there is currently no comprehensive empirical study specifically focusing on Lira District that systematically investigates how customary ownership, leasehold arrangements, and individual land purchase shape women's food security, economic security, and decision-making power. Existing studies largely generalize findings from other regions of Uganda and Africa without capturing the unique socio-economic and post-conflict realities of Lira District.

Lira District presents a unique context because women continue to experience land conflicts, commercialization of land, displacement, and increasing land scarcity in the post-conflict period. The absence of localized evidence limits policy interventions aimed at strengthening women's livelihoods and gender-responsive land governance. This gap therefore justifies the need for future empirical research in Lira District.

5. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that land acquisition practices significantly influence women's livelihoods across Sub-Saharan Africa. While customary land tenure systems remain dominant, they often reinforce patriarchal inequalities that limit women's ownership and control over land resources. Individual land purchase and leasehold arrangements provide alternative pathways for women's access to land but remain constrained by poverty, weak financial inclusion, insecure tenure, and institutional barriers.

Theoretical analysis using Property Rights Theory and Feminist Theory further demonstrates that women's livelihood outcomes are shaped not only by land tenure security but also by broader social and cultural power relations. Despite extensive scholarship on gender and land rights in Africa and Uganda, major empirical gaps remain regarding how land acquisition practices influence women's livelihoods within post-conflict communities such as Lira District.

Addressing this research gap is important for generating localized evidence capable of informing gender-responsive land governance policies and improving women's economic security, food security, and decision-making power in Northern Uganda.

6. Recommendations

The government should strengthen the implementation and enforcement of gender-responsive land laws to ensure women's secure access to land ownership and inheritance rights.

Local governments, cultural leaders, and civil society organizations should intensify community sensitization programs aimed at challenging patriarchal cultural norms that limit women's control over land resources.

Financial institutions and development partners should establish affordable credit schemes and financial inclusion programs specifically targeting rural women to improve their ability to purchase land and invest in productive livelihood activities.

Land registration procedures should be simplified and made more affordable to encourage women's participation in formal land ownership systems.

Future researchers should conduct empirical studies in Lira District to generate localized evidence regarding how customary land acquisition, leasehold arrangements, and individual land purchase influence women's livelihoods in post-conflict settings.

References

Agarwal, B. (2023). Gender and land rights in developing countries. Routledge.

de Beauvoir, S. (1949). The Second Sex. Paris: Gallimard.

Demsetz, H. (1967). Toward a theory of property rights. American Economic Review, 57(2), 347–359.

Doss, C., & Meinzen-Dick, R. (2020). Women's land rights and agricultural productivity. IFPRI.

FAO. (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization.

UN Women. (2023). Women's land rights and economic empowerment in Africa.

World Bank. (2024). Gender and land governance in Sub-Saharan Africa.