

Women's Land Tenure Security and Conflict Resilience in FCAS

Women's Land Tenure Security (WLTS) is an important enabler of resilience in Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings (FCAS). Where women have secure rights to land, households and communities are better placed to rebuild livelihoods, adapt to climate shocks and recover from conflict. Where WLTS is weak, risks of protracted displacement, livelihood insecurity, heightened climate vulnerability and persistent or escalating conflict increase, potentially undermining recovery and long-term stability.

In FCAS, land governance is not a narrow technical issue; it shapes identity, survival, security, power relations and exposure to conflict. Control over land determines who can access livelihoods, who can return and reintegrate after displacement, and whose claims are recognised or contested. While secure land rights are important for everyone, they are particularly critical for groups facing structural marginalisation, including women and Indigenous Peoples. Evidence demonstrates that **secure land rights for women strengthen the systems through which conflict resilience is built and support outcomes associated with reduced vulnerability to conflict and climate shocks**, including agricultural productivity, food security, governance participation, institutional trust, climate resilience and durable solutions.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY

+47pp

Rise in women's agricultural investment after joint certification in Ethiopia

Holden & Ghebru, 2016

AGRICULTURAL GENDER GAP

USD 1Tn

Added to global GDP annually if the agricultural gender gap — rooted in weaker land rights — were closed

FAO, 2023

OFF-FARM EARNINGS

3×

Women with secure rights were three times more likely to work off-farm and save independently

Peterman, 2011

FOOD SECURITY

45M

More people could escape hunger if women had equal access to land

FAO, 2023

Why WLTS Matters in FCAS



Trust in land institutions and fair dispute resolution

When women have secure land rights, they can participate in land governance and dispute-resolution processes. Inclusive governance supports more balanced decisions and strengthens community confidence in local institutions, easing the grievances that can drive tension.



Return and post-conflict recovery

Secure rights give women the standing to reclaim land and restart livelihoods after displacement. Where tenure is insecure, women face higher risks of eviction and exclusion because their claims are informal, undocumented or mediated through male relatives.



Reduced exposure to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and harmful coping strategies

Secure land rights strengthen women's economic position and bargaining power, enabling safer choices and reducing dependence on violent relationships. Losing land removes a woman's primary economic security and can increase exposure to transactional sex or early marriage.



Food security

Women in FCAS shoulder primary responsibility for feeding households, yet hold the least secure rights to the land they farm. Secure tenure gives women the confidence to invest in food production and make crop, input and technology decisions that improve food availability and dietary quality.



Climate adaptation

Secure tenure gives women the incentive to invest in sustainable land management and adopt practices that improve resilience to climate shocks. Insecure tenure weakens these incentives and increases climate vulnerability — disproportionately in FCAS, where shocks are recurring.



Reducing conflict risks

Land disputes are among the most common triggers of local violence in FCAS. When women's claims are not recognised during displacement or return, disputes can escalate and become politicised. Secure tenure lowers contestation, clarifies rights and contributes to earlier resolution.

Effective Approaches for Embedding WLTS into Conflict Resilience

Documented programme learnings and outcomes indicate that **women's tenure security can be strengthened in FCAS to deliver resilience across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus**. Effective approaches:

1	Treat WLTS as a resilience and recovery issue Insecure land rights contribute to prolonged displacement, weaker recovery and local grievance in FCAS. WLTS should therefore be positioned as a stability, protection and resilience investment to strengthen return and recovery pathways.
2	Integrate WLTS across humanitarian, climate, food security, governance and peacebuilding portfolios Outcomes are stronger where legal support, livelihoods, governance reform and social norm change are addressed together rather than through isolated interventions
3	Embed early women's rights to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) support into humanitarian response and durable solutions programming Early action on documentation, dispute resolution and protection against secondary occupation can reduce dispossession risks and support safer, more sustainable return.
4	Move beyond generic gender mainstreaming Effective practice combines dedicated expertise, targeted resources and practical support to help women navigate claims, documentation and disputes in contexts where formal systems are inaccessible or contested.
5	Engage with customary systems alongside formal institutions Progress is more sustainable when local leaders are engaged, women participate meaningfully in dispute resolution and norm change processes, and support is sustained over time. Working through, not around, customary authority reduces backlash.
6	Support gender-transformative land governance and registration WLTS systems must recognise overlapping, shared and secondary rights, and avoid gender blind tilting that imposes rigid boundary-making where mobility, seasonal access or collective use underpin resilience. These rights can be documented through low-cost, fit-for-purpose tools such as participatory mapping, community adjudication and simple spatial data capture that record legitimate claims without imposing exclusion.
7	Treat WLTS as a programme risk and value-for-money consideration Insecure tenure increases exposure to eviction, asset loss, repeated displacement and programme disruption across humanitarian, climate and livelihoods investments, driving avoidable costs and reducing the durability of UK-funded outcomes. Strengthening WLTS reduces these risks and protects programme value.
8	Use existing FCDO policy and investment levers WLTS aligns with current shifts toward systems support, local leadership, resilience and responsible investment. Opportunities for integration already exist across the Women and Girls strategy, Women, Peace and Security NAP, and climate, humanitarian, governance and responsible investment portfolios.

Case Study: Post-ISIS Sinjar (Northern Iraq) – WLTS Enabling Safe Return

Between **2014–2017**, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)'s assault on Sinjar displaced **over 250,000 Yazidis**, a minority ethnic group whose homes, villages and land records were destroyed. With **no land administration** and widespread secondary occupation, families **could not return**. **Women and girls faced the highest barriers: inheritance norms excluded them from land ownership, land documents were destroyed, and female-headed households faced difficulty in proving claims**. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) applied the social tenure domain model, a low-cost, people-to-land relationship approach to map claims, recognise **informal and overlapping rights**, and issue **community-validated occupancy certificates** naming **all household members, including women and children**. Flexible evidence standards (community testimony, photos, utility bills) enabled women, widows and female-headed households to establish rights where formal documents no longer existed. This facilitated **return**. Once claims were validated and certificates issued, families could safely go back, houses were rehabilitated, land disputes declined, and trust in local authorities strengthened. The Iraqi central government later **accepted the certificates as legally valid** and requested scale-up across the governorate. **Sinjar shows WLTS is one of the drivers of return and stability**: when women's land rights are recognised, safe return becomes possible, and conflict risks flatten.

(Source: *UN Habitat, 2018*)