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A Korebaju woman participating in *buen vivir* (“good living”) socialization exercises, Caqueta, Colombia. Photo: Maribel Valencia

From the margins to management

Unlocking women’s power in forest landscapes

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“I took a loan from the VSLA to venture into vegetable farming. The benefits have helped me pay my children’s school fees and reinvest in my cocoa farm.”

Project participant

Introduction

Across many forested regions, women — particularly rural and Indigenous women — are systematically excluded from land and resource governance. This is driven by a complex mix of socio-cultural norms, institutional frameworks and economic inequality (ONIC et al., 2022). These overlapping dynamics restrict women’s access, voice and control, while also increasing their vulnerability to the pressures of landscape degradation, climate change and deforestation.

Yet women often hold unique relationships with forests, shaped by their responsibilities for food, fuel, medicine and caregiving (Agarwal, 2009). These perspectives involve different forms of knowledge and skills that can improve conservation outcomes (World Bank, 2015; Lescourret et al., 2015). While stronger evidence is still needed on the environmental benefits of inclusion, women’s involvement has been linked to more holistic land

stewardship — supporting biodiversity, food security and sustainable livelihoods (Rocheleau et al., 2013; FAO, 2016).

Despite their contributions, women's roles in sustainable land management remain undervalued — both socially and in funding priorities (Gumucio et al., 2020). But momentum is growing; around the world, rural women are claiming recognition and rights. Their leadership presents a powerful opportunity for landscape approaches to become not only more inclusive, but also more effective. As the following case studies show, gender-sensitive and gender-transformative strategies can unlock mutual gains across environmental, social and economic goals (van der Hammen et al., 2023). These cases, from projects of various Tropenbos International network members, show what's possible when women are meaningfully included in landscape management. Through a gender cross cutting approach, the network aims to support women in frontier landscapes (see Box 1). This article spotlights strategies that can be adapted to a range of landscapes and contexts.

Box 1. A gender cross-cutting approach

Tropenbos International represents a global network of organizations that work in frontier landscapes across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, affecting approximately 243,000 people and 16.4 million hectares (TBI, 2024). Since 2019, the network members have collaborated to mainstream **gender (and youth) inclusion as a thematic cross-cutting programme priority** (TBI, 2025). This is applied across three core pathways of change: landscape governance, business and finance, and sustainable land-use practices. A set of five indicators support strategy development, track progress and facilitate peer-to-peer learning across the network. These indicators are scored on a range from 0 to 5, indicating community perceptions of and experiences with each indicator in their landscape. These are the five indicators:

- a. access to land and ecosystem services
- b. land tenure/security
- c. active and legitimate participation in decision-making in land and forest use and governance
- d. access to production resource, inputs and benefits
- e. participation in, contribution to, and benefits of climate-smart practices

Figures 1 to 4 show how these indicators were scored in the four communities. The practitioners (TBI staff) scored the indicators based on their interactions with and observations of the communities.

Lomerian women's integration in territorial governance

Chiquitanía region, Bolivia

The Indigenous territory of Lomerío, in Bolivia's Chiquitanía region, contains the largest tract of neotropical dry forest in the Americas, home to unique flora and fauna (Portillo-Quintero and Sánchez-Azofeifa, 2010). Governance is led by the organization CICOL, and reflects patriarchal structures common in many Indigenous nations. Women have historically been excluded from leadership, with those who are elected often dropping out within the first year due to lack of transportation, caregiving burdens and weak institutional support (IBIF, 2023). This unintended exclusion contradicts Lomerío's own territorial Life Plan, which includes a commitment to internal gender equity.

When Instituto Boliviano de Investigación Forestal (IBIF) began working in Lomerío, it initially had little gender-specific expertise, but it integrated a gender perspective into its institutional framework and co-led a participatory, territory-wide gender diagnosis. This process laid the foundation for the first territory-wide women's meeting, convened by CICOL's gender *cacique* — a traditional authority figure elected to represent women's interests within the territorial governance organization. Women at the meeting collectively decided to create the Indigenous Monkox Women's Organization of Lomerío (OMIML).

Within three years, women secured consistent participation in CICOL's weekly governance meetings and began to contribute to territorial decision-making. IBIF supported OMIML in drafting its internal regulations, accessing funding, and implementing projects. It also promoted the organization's participation in regional dialogues and exchanges, which helped raise its profile and accelerate its impact. See Figure 1.

By 2024, OMIML's access to land and ecosystem services had improved significantly (see indicator a in Figure 1), supported by formal rights to manage a 200-hectare forest area. These gains were made possible through the group's strong coordination with CICOL and support from its general *cacique*, the head authority of the territorial government, both of which were crucial to ensuring institutional backing and legitimacy.

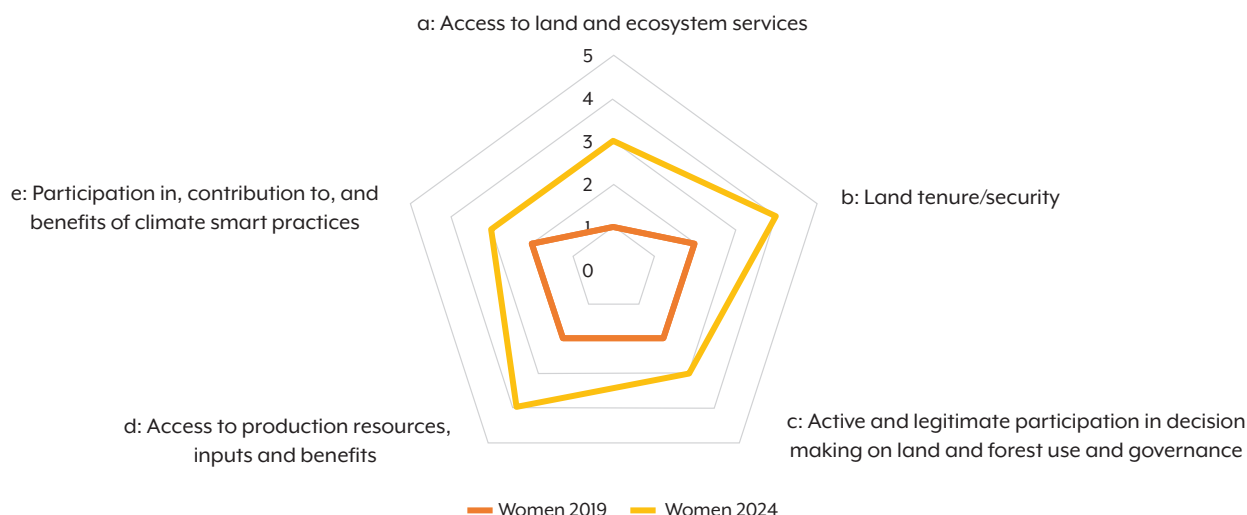


Figure 1. Indicators of gender transformative change among Monko women in Lomerío, Bolivia, 2019 and 2024

Note: Numbers of 0 to 5 are scores of the five indicators (a–e).

At the same time, Lomerío's security over its share of the TCO Monte Verde — a large, collectively held Indigenous territory — also improved (see indicator b in Figure 1). OMIML's technical team accompanied CICOL in assemblies and negotiations with other Chiquitanian groups (Paikonecas and Chiquitanos) to advocate for approval of Lomerío's forest management plan. The plan's approval strengthened land tenure, ensuring access and rights for both the territory and the women's organization.

Together, these developments reflect how targeted support, engaging traditional leaders, and collective mobilization enabled women to make governance gains within one of Bolivia's most ecologically and culturally significant forest landscapes.

Enhancing participation by Indigenous women

Solano landscape, Colombia

In the Amazonian landscape of Solano, Colombia, Indigenous women have been working to gain meaningful participation in the governance and management of their territories. Historically, this has been limited by geographic isolation, the impacts of armed conflict, and governance systems that adopted patriarchal forms through interactions with state and external actors. As a result, women's perspectives, traditional knowledge and priorities have often been excluded — despite their vital roles in sustaining the land.

Responding to women's requests for training, Tropenbos Colombia (TBC) helped establish meetings where women

could gather, exchange knowledge and articulate their priorities. These meetings created a platform for sharing traditional practices in landscape management and for developing a collective agenda for participation in governance. With training in Indigenous and women's rights, project development, and leadership provided at the meetings, participants gained tools to strengthen their presence in local and regional decision-making.

These efforts extended into the Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas del Municipio de Solano Caquetá (ASIMC), the broader Indigenous umbrella organization, which brings together multiple reserves in the Solano landscape. Women began forming governance committees at the community level, and eventually established a regional committee. In parallel, TBC organized dialogues with men who were leaders and elders, focusing on gender roles and traditional values of balance and equity. These sessions fostered new understanding among men about the benefits of inclusive governance for both social resilience and environmental sustainability.

The outcomes have been significant. Women are now serving as village heads, treasurers and secretaries of environmental affairs. Their collective action has enabled them to advocate for issues such as food security, forest restoration and water source protection. They have also taken the lead in formulating and managing projects, securing funding for seed preservation and building “women's houses” — places dedicated to knowledge-sharing, sustainable agriculture and forest care (see Figure 2).

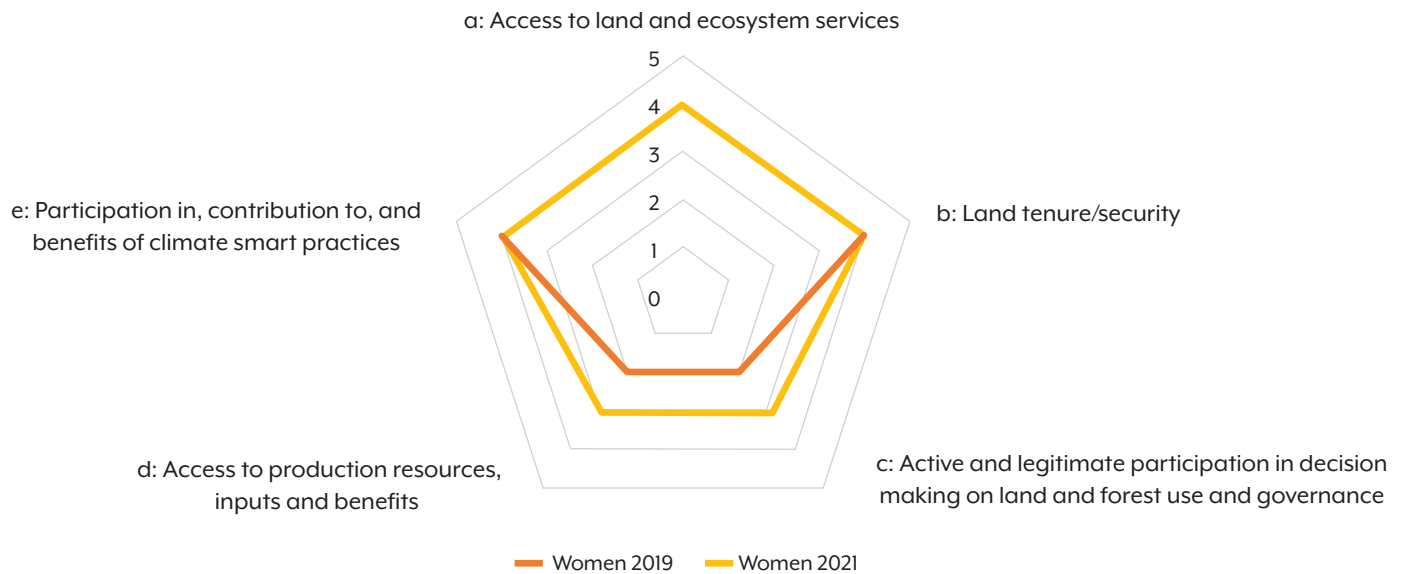


Figure 2. Indicators of gender transformative change among Korebaju women in Caquetá, Colombia, 2019 and 2021

Note: Numbers of 0 to 5 are scores of the five indicators (a–e).

The scores on participation indicators (see indicator c in Figure 2) reflect this shift. By 2021, women's access to decision-making and resources had risen. Indigenous women are now calling for further training in law and policy to scale their engagement at municipal, regional and national levels.

The Solano experience illustrates how creating opportunities for women to organize — supported by training and dialogue with traditional leadership — can catalyze shifts in governance that benefit both community cohesion and environmental stewardship.

Improving women's access to VSLAs

Ghana's Juaboso-Bia and Sefwi Wiawso landscapes

In Ghana's Juaboso-Bia (JB) and Sefwi Wiawso (SW) landscapes, rural women face significant financial barriers that limit their participation in sustainable agriculture and household decision-making. Access to formal financial institutions is limited, interest rates are often prohibitively high, and conventional lending conditions rarely favour women. Many women who are cocoa farmers resort to informal lenders who charge interest rates as high as 100%, creating cycles of debt that constrain livelihoods and land stewardship (TBG, 2023). These financial obstacles contribute to unsustainable land-use practices, exacerbating deforestation, biodiversity loss and land degradation.

To address this, Tropenbos Ghana (TBG) introduced Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in selected communities across the two landscapes. These groups

provide flexible, community-based financial services, allowing members to make weekly savings contributions, borrow funds at low interest (around 5%), and receive annual dividends. The VSLAs addressed longstanding financial exclusion and enabled investment in climate-smart cocoa farming. Women diversified into vegetable production and small-scale trade, while some expanded their cocoa farms — strengthening food security and economic resilience (TBG, 2023) (see Figure 3).

As the VSLAs demonstrated success, community acceptance grew. Some members who had received training began supporting the formation of new groups in nearby communities. The initiative has expanded to 36 VSLAs since its inception in 2022, with more than 1,000 members, 76% of whom are women. This reflects both the model's reach and the active role that women continue to play in driving its growth and impact.

The impact extended beyond finance. VSLA membership significantly improved women's access to farm inputs and production resources (see indicator d in Figure 3). These gains illustrate that financial inclusion was not only about economic resilience — it was a gateway to greater agricultural autonomy and participation in decision-making.

Building on this progress, TBG plans to support the transformation of VSLAs into formal financial cooperatives, offering larger loans, insurance and investment services. This next step aims to enhance women's ability to scale up climate-smart cocoa production, boost income and reinforce their role in building climate-resilient landscapes.

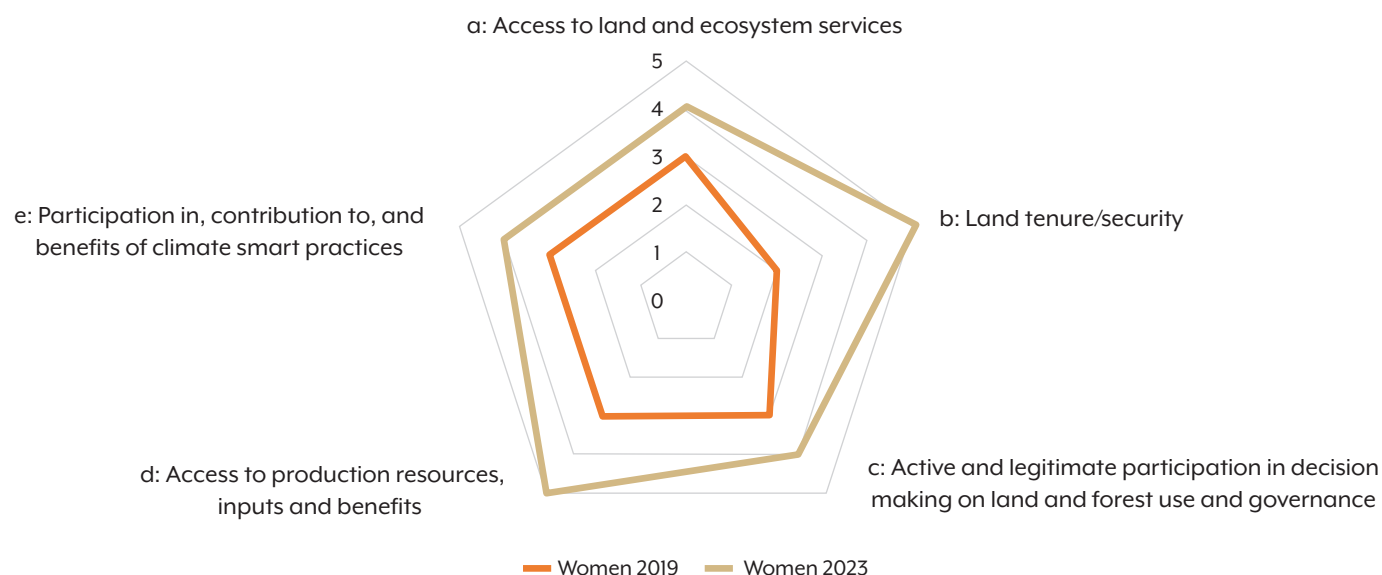


Figure 3. Indicators of gender transformative change among women in Juaboso-Bia (JB) and Sefwi Wiawso (SW) landscapes, Ghana, 2019 and 2023. Note: Numbers of 0 to 5 are scores of the five indicators (a–e).

Women's participation in climate-smart practices

South Ketapang, Indonesia

In South Ketapang, West Kalimantan, the Matan Hilir Selatan (MHS) sub-district is characterized by carbon-rich peatlands that support high biodiversity and biomass. These peatlands are extremely fire-prone — particularly during periods of drought.

The area is home to Javanese, Sundanese and Malay communities, where land-use decisions are traditionally dominated by men. Cultural and religious norms often restrict women to domestic roles, and land ownership is

typically held by men as household heads. As a result, women can access and use land and ecosystem services only with a man's permission, limiting their influence over how land is managed.

Since 2018, Tropenbos Indonesia (TB Indonesia) has worked in four villages to improve women's access to knowledge of and decision-making in climate-resilient agriculture. A series of training programmes — including gender-responsive farmer field schools (FFSs) — introduced women to practical alternatives to slash-and-burn land clearing and to methods for producing organic fertilizer using household waste.



Onua Do VSLA members in Suhenso, Ghana, proudly displaying their annual share of financial contributions. Photo: Elliot Mensah

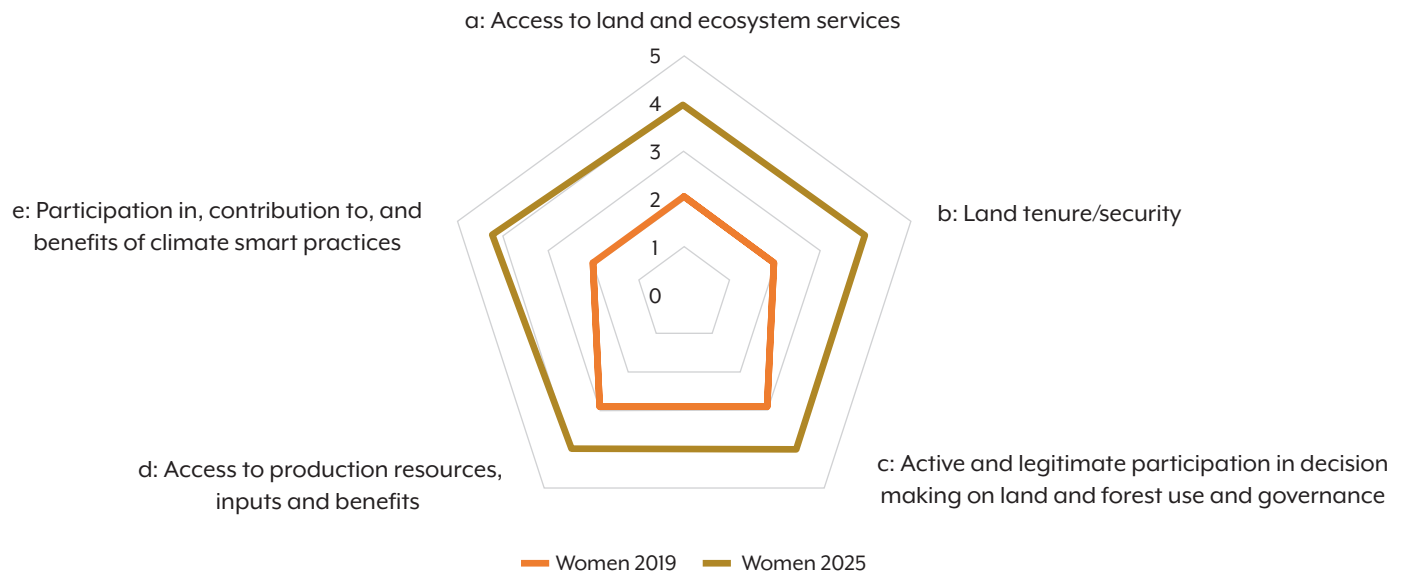


Figure 4. Indicators of gender transformative change among women in Matan Hilir Selatan and Simpang Dua Sub-districts of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, 2019 and 2025

Note: Numbers of 0 to 5 are scores of the five indicators (a–e).

With these new skills, women began to independently establish agroforestry plots. On mineral soils, they cultivated coconut and rubber; on peatland, they grew oil palm and pineapple. These mixed systems help maintain land productivity while reducing fire risk and improving resilience to drought and floods (Widayati, 2024). The diversification also provided women with multiple income sources, supporting household food security and economic independence.

Over five years, women's participation in landscape governance also increased. They began contributing to the management of Village Forest Management Units (LDPH) and Village Forest Business Units (KUPS). Their participation in land-use decision-making (see indicator c in Figure 4) and climate-smart practices (see indicator e in Figure 4) also grew, marking a substantial shift in both confidence and practical engagement.

Previously hesitant to enter a domain dominated by men, women now report increased agency, awareness and capacity to influence decisions. Their presence in fire prevention patrols and sustainable farming groups underscores this transformation.

The case of Ketapang shows how ongoing gender-aware training, combined with encouragement and institutional support, can unlock the potential of women as active land stewards — benefiting families and climate resilience.

Lessons learned

Across these four landscapes, meaningful progress was made in women's participation, particularly in governance, finance and land-use practice. These shifts were not the result of interventions alone. Women in these regions were already mobilizing, organizing, and advocating for greater influence in forest and land management. What the interventions did was seize on this momentum — responding to the energy and appetite for change that already existed among women.

In governance, women in Bolivia formed the all-women OMIML group and were granted formal access to manage a forest area. This gave them not only authority, but also legitimacy — echoing findings that all-women forest committees, especially under experienced leadership, often lead to greater influence and stronger internal advocacy (Agarwal, 2009). In Colombia, Indigenous and peasant women took on public roles in territorial governance — as village heads, treasurers and secretaries of environmental affairs — pushing for biodiversity-focused restoration and the protection of food and water systems. These shifts align with studies showing that when women gain influence in governance, they bring different agendas than men do, often centred on long-term resilience, cooperation and compliance with shared rules (Agarwal, 2009).



Siti, a farmer from Sungai Bakau Village, fertilizes crops on peatlands after receiving training at an FFS. Photo: Irpan Lamago

In financial inclusion, VSLAs in Ghana helped women gain financial independence, diversify income through non-timber forest products, and invest in sustainable farming inputs. This shift not only improved agricultural practices but also began to shift household dynamics, as men observed and, in some cases, supported women's rising decision-making power. Similar observations from other contexts confirm that access to finance and financial literacy are key drivers of women's autonomy and intra-household negotiation power (Simelton et al., 2021; Amponsah et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, tailored training provided women with practical tools and confidence. The participatory and gender-focused curriculum opened up conversations around gender roles and decision-making. Women began to abandon slash-and-burn techniques in favour of fire-resilient practices. These results mirror research showing that experiential learning with embedded gender reflection leads to both behavioural and environmental transformation (Jarial et al., 2024).

Does fostering social equity contribute to improved environmental management and climate resilience?

The case studies suggest that it can — and often does — when inclusion is meaningful and grounded in local realities. Women in Colombia have consistently advocated for food security and ecological restoration, leading to more biodiverse reforestation and broadening the conversation to include nutrition, health and cultural practices. In Indonesia, women who had previously followed their husbands' slash-and-burn methods began implementing non-burn land clearing techniques after gaining access to training and decision-making. This directly contributed to fire prevention and healthier ecosystems. The VSLAs in Ghana allowed women to invest in tools and diversify farming. With more financial freedom, they were able to adopt climate-smart agricultural practices, leading to improved resilience and income generation.

These examples underline how inclusion through women's groups, training and finance mechanisms can unlock access to knowledge, resources and networks, enabling sustainable land practices while empowering women (Begum, 2024). Successful efforts also engaged both men and women leaders, helping shift local mindsets

and creating a more supportive context for women's environmental leadership.

Conclusion and recommendations

Practical, gender-responsive strategies can make a powerful difference, by addressing longstanding inequalities, and by unlocking women's ability to lead, innovate and influence how land is used.

Approaches worked best when layered with and supported by broader community engagement, including with men leaders and elders. These programmes also took the time to understand local dynamics and barriers.

Common trends in inclusion and empowerment strategies emerged across the diverse landscapes.

Ultimately, the most impactful strategies weren't just about "including women" but supporting their agency, confidence and leadership. These cases show how gender-responsive, locally grounded interventions can deliver both social equity and environmental sustainability.

This points to an important takeaway for practitioners: transformative gender strategies are possible, adaptable and urgently needed. Failing to support women's participation is not just an equity issue — it is a missed opportunity for stronger, more resilient landscapes.

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