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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Determinants of Women's Land Tenure Security in Peri-Urban Grafton, Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

While a land-tenure system may consider the needs of women, securing these needs hinges on the specific land rights or ownership rights they hold. Land tenure encompasses land rights, which are the distinct entitlements that individuals and groups possess within a system. Hence, securing land rights for individuals and groups is the more direct pathway than securing land tenure itself. This study investigates the complex variables influencing land-tenure security for women in Grafton Community, a peri-urban settlement in Sierra Leone. Expanding on prior research highlighting the unequal obstacles women face in obtaining and securing land rights, this study aims to examine the intricate interplay of sociocultural, economic and legal factors shaping women's experiences with land tenure in this specific context. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research combined qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with community leaders, women, youth, government officials, NGO representatives and traditional authorities with quantitative data gathered through surveys. The qualitative data explored historical context, institutional responses and policies related to women's land rights and tenure security, capturing lived experiences and perspectives on contested areas and social conflicts. Focus group discussions were conducted with women, exploring the experiences of various subgroups (young women, elderly women, women with disabilities and women landowners) regarding tenure security. The survey collected demographic information, land ownership details and opinions on contested areas and social conflicts, enabling statistical analysis. Key findings reveal that gender norms, customary land-tenure systems, poverty and rapid urbanization significantly contribute to women's vulnerability in land ownership and control. The study recommends policy interventions promoting women's property rights, gender equality in land rights and women's economic empowerment to enhance their land-tenure security.

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1.0 Introduction

Land tenure and gender issues are sensitive and perpetually relevant aspects of human society. Recognizing the critical role of secure land rights in

achieving broader development goals, this study directly aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality. While significant progress has been made in various sectors, women in many

African nations, including Sierra Leone, continue to face substantial obstacles in accessing, controlling and securely holding land. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2018) reports that less than 15% of landholders globally are women, who generally possess less land and are less likely to hold property titles. This disparity persists despite, and sometimes due to, inadequate enforcement of gender-equitable legal systems and the limitations of joint property titles in guaranteeing equitable control (Doss et al., 2013, 2018).

To ensure clarity throughout this study, it is important to define some key terms. To start with, *land tenure* refers to the system of rules governing the allocation, use and transfer of rights in land. In this context, security implies the certainty and enforceability of these rights, protecting individuals and groups from arbitrary loss or interference. *Land rights* are the specific entitlements individuals or groups hold with respect to land, encompassing a range from use rights to ownership. *Peri-urban* areas are the transitional zones between rural and urban environments, often characterized by rapid social, economic and spatial changes.

Land is a fundamental resource, serving as a basis for livelihoods, food security and social identity for individuals and communities. Securing tenure over land provides stability, encourages investment and fosters sustainable resource management. For women, secure land rights are particularly crucial. They enhance economic empowerment, improve household well-being, increase bargaining power within the household and community, and contribute to overall gender equality. In peri-urban settlements like Grafton Community, the increasing pressure on land due to urbanization can exacerbate existing gender inequalities in land access and control, making women's tenure security even more precarious.

Previous research has consistently highlighted the unequal obstacles women face in obtaining and securing land rights in Sierra Leone and across Africa. These obstacles often manifest in various forms, including challenges related to *customary inheritance practices that favour male lineage, limited access to formal land markets, vulnerability to displacement due to development projects, and*

boundary conflicts that disproportionately affect women's landholdings. This study builds upon this existing body of knowledge by specifically examining the complex interplay of sociocultural, economic and legal factors influencing women's land-tenure security in the unique context of Grafton Community. While prior studies have identified broad trends, this research delves into the specific experiences and challenges faced by women in this peri-urban setting, aiming to provide a more nuanced understanding of the local dynamics at play.

Despite the existing research highlighting gender disparities in land rights, there remains a need for in-depth, context-specific studies that explore the multifaceted nature of women's land-tenure insecurity in rapidly changing peri-urban environments like Grafton Community. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing women's land-tenure security in this specific locale. The central research questions guiding this investigation are as follows: (i) What are the key sociocultural, economic and legal factors that influence women's land-tenure security in Grafton Community? (ii) How do these factors interact to shape women's experiences with land access, control and ownership in this peri-urban context? (iii) What policy interventions and community-based strategies can be implemented to enhance women's land-tenure security in Grafton Community?

Understanding these dynamics is significant for informing targeted policy interventions and community-led initiatives that can strengthen women's land rights, promote gender equality and contribute to sustainable and equitable development in peri-urban Sierra Leone. Gender inequality in Africa is mostly a result of deeply ingrained patrilineal inheritance systems and cultural traditions supporting land ownership. According to Arko-Adjei (2012) and FAO (2018), these traditions establish complicated rights and obligations based on gender and frequently make it harder for women to obtain and own land. Women's ability to benefit from land resources can be either enabled or constrained by social interactions within families and marriages, as Ribot and Peluso (2003) clearly demonstrate. This is especially true in peri-urban areas, where women encounter more obstacles

when trying to use land for agricultural purposes (FAO, 2018). Although it is customary for women to obtain land through marriage, power dynamics that already exist in families and communities may restrict their ability to govern and make decisions about how to use it. As highlighted by Grabe et al. (2021), resolving these structural discrepancies in women's legal rights is ultimately necessary to close the gender gap in land ownership. This is in line with the general objectives of supporting sustainable development and gender parity in Africa.

Even in marriage or after divorce, women in Sierra Leone face considerable obstacles in securing their rights to family land because the head of the home frequently retains control (Green Scenery, 2020). This challenge is a result of worries that third parties, such as prospective or existing spouses, may attempt to claim family assets (Errico, 2021). If they try to give land to their own children after inheriting it as unmarried women, they may face opposition from other family members because it could mean that the land may end up leaving the family line (Errico et al., 2020). Non-native married women may obtain access through their husbands, but giving them sole ownership may cause problems if they later get remarried after a divorce or become widows (Espinoza, 2017). These complications highlight the necessity for sophisticated strategies that take into account cultural norms.

2.0 Literature review

This section provides a critical overview of existing literature relevant to women's land-tenure security, particularly within peri-urban settlements. It examines key theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, highlighting the complexities and challenges women face in accessing, controlling and securing land rights.

Conceptual Framework

To provide a robust analytical lens for this study, we will consider two key theoretical frameworks: intersectionality theory and patriarchal structures theory. Understanding how these frameworks intersect and diverge in the context of women's land rights in Grafton Community will inform our analysis.

Intersectionality Theory

There are a number of compelling reasons why intersectionality theory is crucial for understanding this subject. In peri-urban land-tenure regimes, intersectionality aids in the unraveling of the intricate power dynamics at work. It illustrates how women's experiences are influenced not only by their gender but also by their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, age, disability and other social identities (Chiweshe et al., 2017). Women's land rights in peri-urban settlements are frequently impacted by multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination. By utilizing intersectionality theory, researchers can investigate the compounding and interacting mechanisms of these various types of prejudice (Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020). Recognizing that women's experiences in Grafton Community may differ from those in other peri-urban communities due to specific local variables, this theory allows for a context-specific analysis of land-tenure security (Lambrecht, 2016). Intersectionality theory can help shape more focused and efficient policy interventions by acknowledging the complex aspects of women's land tenure insecurity (Doss et al., 2018).

By acknowledging the range of needs and experiences among women in peri-urban communities, intersectionality challenges the propensity to treat women as a homogeneous group (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). The aim of utilizing intersectionality theory in this context is to offer a thorough comprehension of the variables impacting the security of land tenure for women in Grafton Community. This involves determining and examining the particular obstacles that various groups of women encounter in light of their overlapping identities, providing guidance for the creation of land-tenure policies and initiatives that are more equitable and successful, challenging oversimplified tropes about gender and land rights by emphasizing the diversity of women's experiences, and contributing to more general conversations about land rights and gender equality in peri-urban settings in Sierra Leone and elsewhere. Ultimately, by employing intersectionality theory, researchers can gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the complex issues women confront in obtaining land tenure in peri-urban settlements such as Grafton Community,

which will lead to the development of more effective policies and solutions.

Patriarchal Structures Theory

Patriarchal structures theory offers another critical lens through which to analyze women's land-tenure insecurity. This perspective emphasizes the systemic nature of male dominance and the ways in which social, economic and political institutions are structured to privilege men and disadvantage women (Walby, 1990). Within the family and household, women in patriarchal societies often experience systemic oppression and exploitation, while men disproportionately benefit from their labour (Wisborg, 2014; Sultana, 2011). These deeply ingrained patriarchal and patrimonial systems often restrict women's ability to make decisions and obstruct stable land tenure (Unruh, 2008). While intersectionality theory highlights the multiple and intersecting identities that shape women's experiences, patriarchal structures theory focuses specifically on the overarching influence of gender hierarchies in perpetuating land-tenure insecurity for women. Understanding the defence mechanisms of patriarchy is crucial to comprehending its functioning and impact on women's land rights. Empirical studies provide compelling evidence that granting women secure access to land is a means of achieving sustainable livelihoods (Wehrmann et al., 2019), enhancing their influence over livelihood activities, increasing their family's negotiating power, and improving child nutrition and health. Furthermore, secure land tenure and the absence of violence can significantly boost women's agricultural production.

Comparison of Theories of Intersectionality and Patriarchal Structures in Relation to Women's Land Rights

While the theories of intersectionality and patriarchal structures are crucial for understanding women's land rights, they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives. Patriarchal structures theory provides a broad understanding of the systemic gender inequalities that underpin women's land-tenure insecurity. It highlights the pervasive influence of male dominance in shaping laws, customs and social norms related to land ownership and inheritance. Intersectionality theory, on the

other hand, offers a more nuanced understanding of how gender intersects with other social identities to create unique experiences of disadvantage and marginalization for different groups of women. By considering factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age and disability, intersectionality reveals the heterogeneity of women's experiences and challenges the notion of a monolithic "women's issue" in land tenure. A comprehensive analysis of women's land rights in Grafton Community requires the application of both these frameworks. Recognizing the overarching influence of patriarchal structures while simultaneously acknowledging the diverse experiences of women based on their intersecting identities will provide a more holistic understanding of the complexities at play.

Background on Land Tenure in Grafton Community and Previous Research

The land-tenure system in Sierra Leone, including in peri-urban areas like Grafton Community, is characterized by a complex interplay of customary and statutory laws. Customary law, which varies across different ethnic groups, governs a significant portion of land ownership and inheritance, often adhering to patriarchal and patrilineal principles. Statutory law, while aiming for gender equality in land rights (as highlighted in Article 27 of the 1991 Constitution), often faces challenges in implementation and is sometimes superseded by customary practices, particularly in matters of chieftaincy land and inheritance. This dual system creates a landscape where women's land rights are often precarious and subject to the norms and interpretations of local customs. Understanding the specific customary practices prevalent in Grafton Community and how they interact with statutory provisions is crucial for analysing women's land-tenure security in this context. This study builds upon previous research that has examined gender disparities in land ownership and access in Sierra Leone (Renner-Thomas, 2010; Green Scenery, 2020). The previous studies have highlighted the persistent challenges that women face under both the customary and statutory systems, including discriminatory inheritance practices and limited decision-making power over land. Specifically, the work of Argwal (2004) found that while statutory laws exist to protect women's land rights, their

implementation is often undermined by deeply entrenched customary practices in peri-urban areas. This current research seeks to expand on these findings by providing a focused analysis of the multifaceted factors influencing women's land-tenure security within the specific socioeconomic and cultural context of Grafton Community.

To provide a clear understanding of the study's focus, this section will briefly define key concepts. As previously defined, peri-urban areas are transitional zones between rural and urban areas characterized by dynamic land-use changes and a mix of rural and urban characteristics (Kanji et al., 2005; Olajuyigbe, 2016). As noted above, this involves the interaction of customary and statutory laws, with customary practices often holding significant sway, particularly regarding women's land rights. These encompass the legal and customary entitlements that women have to access, use, control and own land in Sierra Leone, often facing challenges due to patriarchal norms and discriminatory practices (Renner-Thomas, 2010). Tenure security refers to the certainty and enforceability of land rights, protecting individuals and groups from arbitrary loss or interference, which is often compromised for women in many contexts (Unruh, 2008). *Factors influencing women's land-tenure security* include sociocultural norms, economic pressures, legal frameworks, institutional practices and demographic changes that can either enhance or undermine women's ability to secure their land rights. In the context of land tenure, this refers to women's increased control over land and related resources, leading to greater economic autonomy, social influence and decision-making power within households and communities.

Grafton Community is located in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone. Grafton presents a highly relevant and insightful case study for examining women's land-tenure security in a peri-urban context owing to a confluence of dynamic characteristics typical of such transitional zones, coupled with specific local factors that amplify the challenges women face. Like many peri-urban areas globally, Grafton is likely experiencing rapid population growth and a shift in land-use patterns. This transition from predominantly rural, agricultural land to a mix of residential, commercial and potentially industrial uses creates increased

pressure on land resources. This rapid urbanization often leads to land speculation, increased land values and the formalization or informal re-allocation of land. Women, who often have weaker customary or formal rights compared to men, are particularly vulnerable to being marginalized or displaced during these processes. As such, studying Grafton can reveal how these dynamics specifically impact women's access to and control over land in a rapidly changing environment.

Sierra Leone has a dual land-tenure system where customary law operates alongside statutory law. Peri-urban areas like Grafton often represent a complex interface between these systems. Customary practices, which can vary significantly between ethnic groups, often hold sway in land allocation and inheritance, and these practices frequently disadvantage women. Investigating Grafton can illuminate how specific customary norms regarding land ownership, inheritance and decision-making interact with statutory laws intended to promote gender equality. It can reveal the on-the-ground realities of how these systems collide or coexist and the implications for women's tenure security. Understanding the specific customary practices prevalent in Grafton and their evolution under urbanization pressures is crucial. Rapid urbanization and the intersection of customary and statutory systems can create fertile ground for land disputes. Increased land value can intensify competition, and unclear boundaries or overlapping claims between customary and formal authorities can lead to conflicts. Women's land rights are often more vulnerable in conflict situations. They may lack the social capital, legal knowledge or financial resources to effectively navigate land disputes. Studying Grafton could reveal the nature and frequency of land-related conflicts and the specific ways in which women's tenure security is threatened or undermined by these conflicts. Understanding if there have been recent land grabs, boundary disputes or conflicts related to development projects and their gendered impacts would be particularly insightful.

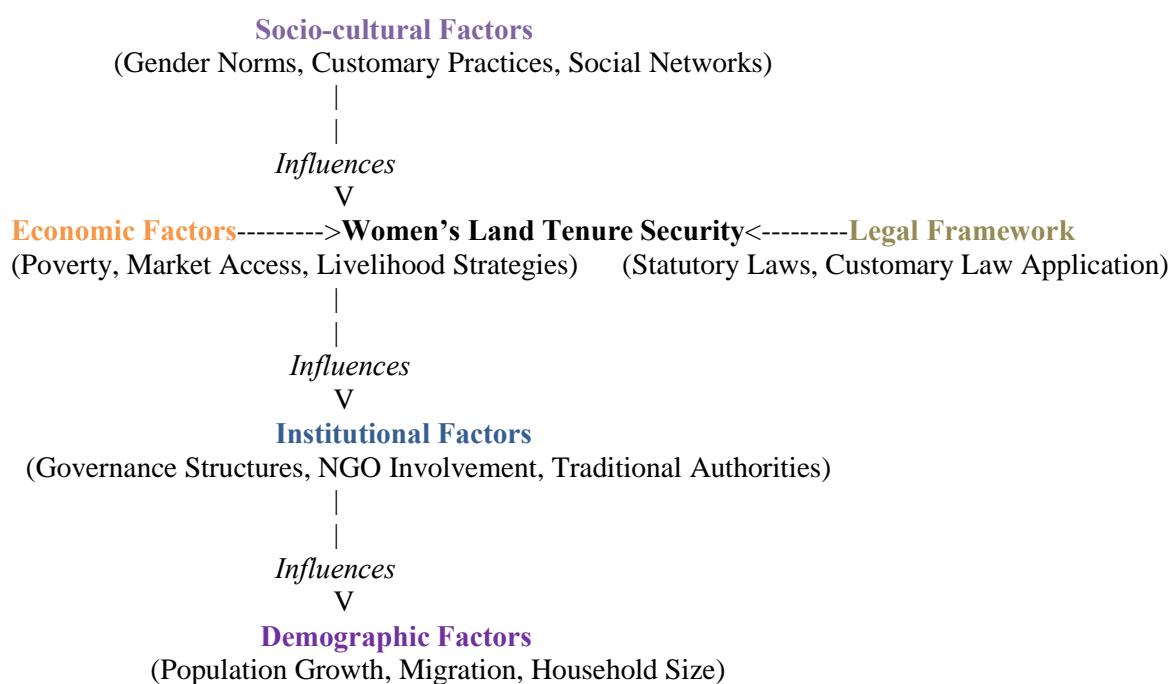
Grafton, like many communities in Sierra Leone, likely operates within a framework of established sociocultural norms and gender roles that can significantly influence women's ability to claim and secure land rights. Patrilineal inheritance systems,

where land is traditionally passed down through the male lineage, are common. Research in Grafton can provide a nuanced understanding of how these deeply ingrained gender norms shape women's access to land through inheritance, marriage, or purchase. It can also explore how women negotiate or challenge these norms within their families and communities in a peri-urban setting where traditional structures might be evolving. Peri-urban areas often exhibit a mix of agricultural and non-agricultural economic activities. Women's livelihoods in Grafton might be tied to farming, small-scale trading or other activities that depend on access to land. Examining women's land-tenure security in relation to their economic activities in Grafton can reveal how insecure land rights impact their livelihoods, economic empowerment and overall well-being. It is crucial, therefore, to determine whether changes in land use due to urbanization affect women's traditional economic

roles and their access to land for these purposes. *Grafton Community offers a valuable case study because it likely embodies the dynamic tensions and complexities inherent in peri-urban transitions, particularly concerning the interplay of customary and statutory land tenure systems, the pressures of rapid urbanization, the potential for land-related conflicts and the influence of prevailing sociocultural and gender norms. By focusing on this specific community, the research can provide context-specific insights into the multifaceted challenges women face in securing their land rights and contribute to the development of more targeted and effective interventions.*

Conceptual Framework

To illustrate the relationships between the key variables in this study, a conceptual framework is presented below:



The conceptual framework illustrates how sociocultural factors, economic factors, the legal framework, institutional factors, and demographic factors are hypothesized to influence women's land-tenure security in Grafton Community. The arrows indicate the direction of influence. For instance, deeply ingrained gender norms within sociocultural factors may negatively impact women's ability to inherit or own land. Similarly, the application of

customary law within the legal framework might prioritize male inheritance over female inheritance. Understanding these interconnected influences is crucial for addressing women's land tenure insecurity effectively.

Thus, the literature review highlights the complex interplay of theoretical perspectives, empirical findings and the contextual factors that shape

women's land-tenure security, particularly in peri-urban settings. By examining intersectionality and patriarchal structures theories, providing a background on the land-tenure system in Grafton Community and relevant previous research, defining key concepts, describing the study area, and presenting a conceptual framework, this section thus lays the groundwork for a nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities related to women's land rights in Grafton Community. The subsequent sections will build upon this foundation to present the study's methodology, findings and recommendations.

3.0 Materials and Methods

In order to investigate contested areas and social tensions in Grafton Community, Sierra Leone, this study used a mixed-methods approach. To provide a complete picture of the problem, the methodology combined quantitative and qualitative data gathering methodologies (Bryman, 2004). Twenty households — including women, youth, community leaders, and those with a history of conflict involvement — were purposefully chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews in order to learn about their specific experiences with contested areas and social conflicts. Ten women and fourteen other participants — young people, people with disabilities, the elderly, and landowners — participated in separate focus groups to examine their experiences with land-tenure security. To get information on policies, institutional actions and historical background linked to land use and conflict management in Grafton, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organisations, and traditional authorities were also interviewed. To gather information on demographics, land ownership status, gender dynamics of land ownership, tenure conflicts, perceptions of contested locations and experiences of social

conflict, the researchers administered a structured survey to 35 randomly selected homes.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data in order to examine the features of the land (size, location, productivity), as well as the demographics of the women involved in land disputes (age, marital status, size of household). To evaluate the effect of tenure conflicts on land access, the researchers used regression analysis to identify the variables influencing land-tenure security for women, such as the existence of land titles and involvement in decision-making bodies. Impact evaluation analysis measured changes in women's land access, agricultural output and income levels by comparing data from before and after a tenure intervention (e.g., legal assistance programme, enablement, livelihood programme). The influence on women's livelihoods, their methods for gaining access to land and their experiences with tenure issues were all understood through the use of qualitative data gathered from focus group talks and transcripts. Individual accounts of women in conflict were subjected to narrative analysis in the effort to illuminate the prevailing power dynamics and sociocultural environment.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

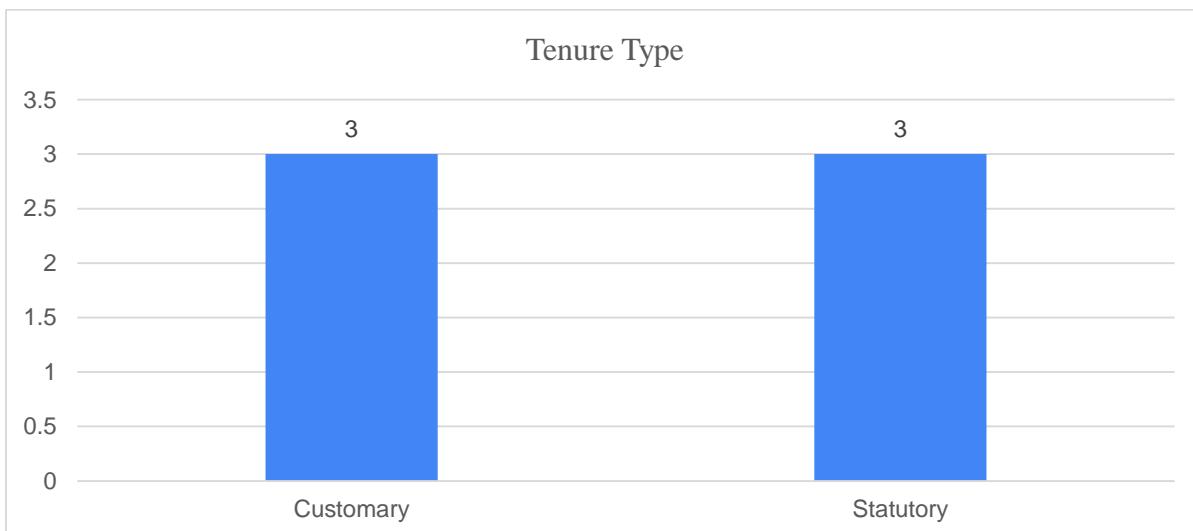
The results and data analysis of the survey data set are presented in this section. The data set is made up of replies from respondents with information on their land status, type of land tenure, age and gender, access to land constraints and benefits, and land ownership by age and gender. To make the data set easier to understand, it is presented in tabular form. The results of the data analysis were presented using appropriate tables and visualisations in an understandable and succinct manner. The study will draw attention to important findings and trends found in the data.

Figure 1: Land Status vs. Land Rights of Women Respondents

Data Source: Field Data – Interview, 2024

Figure 1 presents the "Land Status" of women respondents. For clarity, "Land Status" in this context refers to the reported condition or relationship women have with land, which may or may not equate to formal "Land Rights" (legally or customarily recognized entitlements). As discussed in the literature review (drawing on Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011), "use rights" and "access rights" are critical dimensions of land status that can empower individuals even without full ownership. The finding that "Use right" was the most frequently

reported (3 out of 60 women) suggests that the ability to utilize land for various purposes is a significant aspect of women's engagement with land in Grafton. This aligns with Ribot and Peluso's (2003) emphasis on the power derived from land use. Similarly, the reporting of "Access right" by two women indicates the importance of being able to enter and use land, even without ownership. The limited reporting of "Transfer right" by only one woman may reflect existing sociocultural or legal constraints on women's ability to alienate land.

Figure 2: Tenure Type of Women Respondents

Data Source: Field Data – Interview, 2024

The equal representation of "Customary" and "Statutory" tenure reported by women respondents in Figure 2 (3 out of 60 each) highlights the pluralistic legal landscape governing land in Grafton Community, a characteristic feature of many peri-urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone (The Gender Hub, 2024). This finding suggests that women's landholding experiences are shaped by both traditional norms and state-enacted laws, a situation that creates a complex interplay with potential implications for their tenure security and rights.

Moyo and Foray's (2009) observation that customary tenure is deeply embedded in community norms and traditions is particularly relevant here. In Sierra Leone, as in many parts of the region, customary law often dictates land access and use rights, with lineage and social belonging playing crucial roles (ResearchGate, 2025). However, these customary systems are frequently characterized by patriarchal norms that can limit women's ownership and control over land, often granting them only usufructuary rights through male relatives (Uon Digital Repository, 2006; Trócaire, 2023).

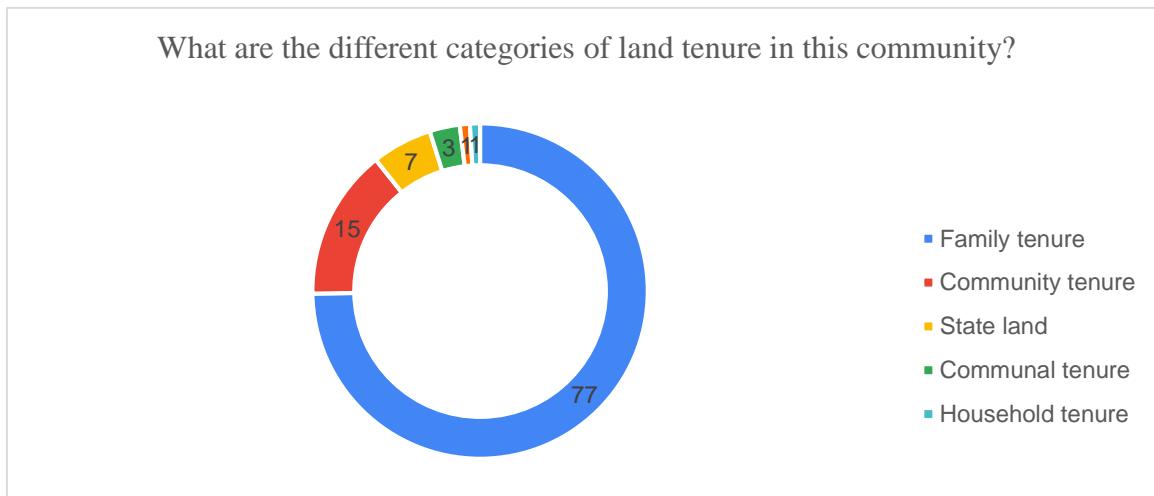
Recent literature (ResearchGate, 2025) on Sierra Leone corroborates this, indicating that despite the existence of a National Land Policy (2015) aiming for gender equality in land access, customary practices often favour male heads of families in land allocation, with women's participation in land-related decision-making remaining limited.

Conversely, the presence of "Statutory" tenure among the women respondents indicates the influence of formal legal frameworks. Statutory tenure, based on state-enacted laws, theoretically provides a pathway for women to own land

independently. Sierra Leone has indeed passed several laws and policies aimed at ensuring equal land rights for women, such as the Devolution of Estate Act (2007) and the National Land Commission Act (2022) (The Gender Hub, 2024). However, the equal representation in the survey suggests that the reach and impact of these statutory provisions on women's actual landholding in Grafton may be limited or that women are navigating both systems concurrently.

The coexistence of these tenure types in a peri-urban setting like Grafton often leads to overlaps and contradictions. As land becomes more commodified and individualized in peri-urban areas (ResearchGate, 2024), the interface between customary and statutory systems can create tenure insecurity, particularly for vulnerable groups like women, if their rights are not clearly defined and protected across both regimes. Recent literature emphasizes that even with progressive statutory laws, their implementation at the local level is often hindered by deeply-rooted customary norms and structural issues (The Gender Hub, 2024).

Therefore, the equal reporting of customary and statutory tenure among women in Grafton highlights the need to understand how these systems interact on the ground and their differential impacts on women's land rights and tenure security. Quite crucial is further investigation into the specific nature of these tenure arrangements and the extent to which women can effectively exercise their rights within each system. This finding aligns with ongoing discussions in the literature about the challenges of achieving gender equality in land rights within plural legal systems in Africa (The Gender Hub, 2024).

Figure 3: Categories of Land Tenure in the Community

Data Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

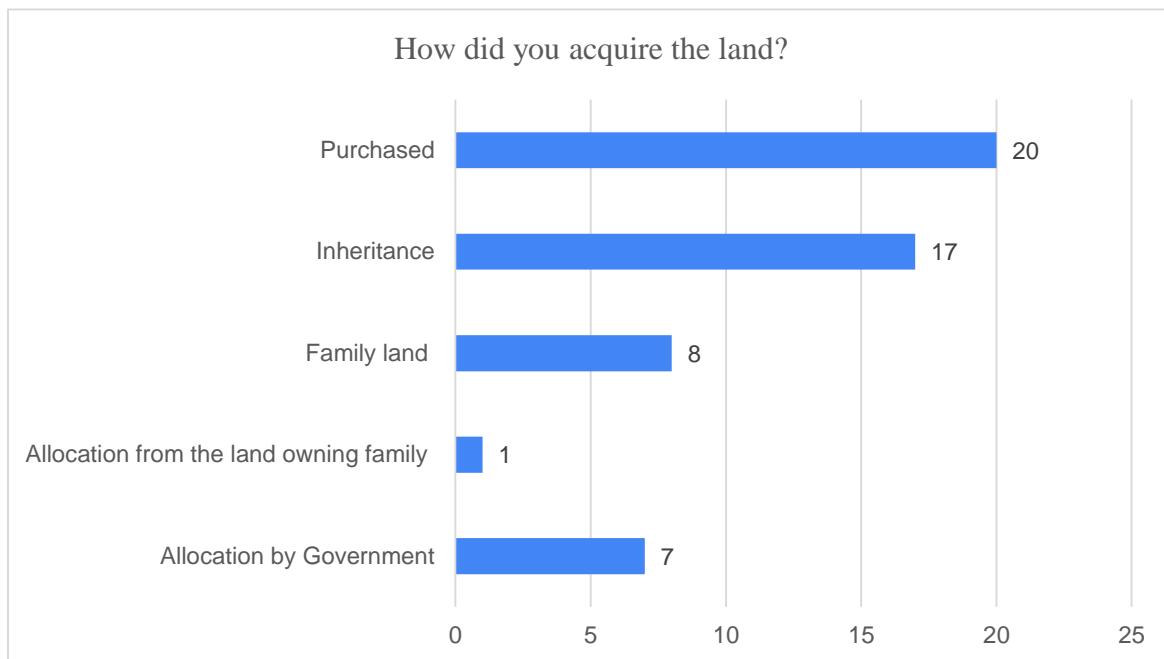
The prevalence of "Family Tenure" as the dominant land-tenure category in Grafton Community (77 out of 103 respondents), as Figure 3 shows, strongly aligns with existing literature on land tenure systems in Sierra Leone (ActionAid International, 2012; COOPI & UNDP, 2012) and across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Berry, 1993). These studies consistently highlight the central role of kinship and lineage in governing land access and control under customary law, which, as noted earlier, holds significant sway outside the Western Area of Sierra Leone (The Gender Hub, 2024).

However, as Butler (2009) and numerous scholars on gender and land rights (Agarwal, 1994; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997) emphasize, the seemingly communal nature of "Family Tenure" often masks underlying patriarchal norms that can significantly disadvantage women. Within these systems, land rights are frequently mediated through male relatives (husbands, fathers, brothers, or male lineage heads), granting women usufructuary rights rather than outright ownership or control (Namati, 2015; The Gender Hub, 2024). Inheritance practices within family tenure often favour male heirs, leaving women with insecure or limited claims to land, even land they may have actively cultivated and contributed to (ReliefWeb, 2012).

The intersection of "Tenure Type" (Customary/Statutory) with this dominant "Category"

of Family Tenure is therefore critical for understanding women's landholding experiences in Grafton. While statutory laws in Sierra Leone, such as the Devolution of Estate Act (2007) and the more recent Customary Land Rights Act (2022), aim to provide women with equal inheritance and land rights (*The Sierra Leone Telegraph*, 2022), their effectiveness in challenging deeply entrenched customary practices within family tenure remains a significant concern (Modern Ghana, 2025; The Gender Hub, 2024). As highlighted by various sources (Green Scenery, 2021; Land for Life Initiative, 2023), the implementation of these progressive laws is often hampered by a lack of awareness, resistance from traditional authorities, and the continued prioritization of customary norms at the local level.

The lower prevalence of other categories like "Community Tenure," "State Land," "Communal Tenure," and "Household Tenure" suggests that land in Grafton is largely embedded within familial structures. This reinforces the critical need to focus on how gender dynamics operate within these family-based systems to understand and address women's land-tenure insecurity in this peri-urban context. The findings underscore the importance of interventions that not only advocate legal reforms but also actively engage with customary institutions and social norms to promote women's equitable access to and control over family land (DAI Blogs, 2024).

Figure 4: Method of Land Acquisition

Data Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

The diverse land acquisition methods identified in Figure 4 within Grafton Community are attested in the broader literature on land tenure in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in peri-urban contexts where customary and statutory systems often intersect (Lund, 2008). The finding that government allocation plays a role aligns with state interventions in land management, although its impact on women's tenure security can be varied, sometimes reinforcing existing inequalities if not implemented in a gender-sensitive manner (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003).

The significant role of family-based land acquisition (allocation and ownership) underscores the continued importance of kinship structures and customary practices, a common feature across the region (Berry, 1993). However, as argued by researchers like Chanock (1991), these customary systems are not static and are often subject to negotiation and contestation, potentially disadvantaging women owing to patriarchal norms. The emphasis on understanding the gendered implications of family land aligns with studies highlighting how inheritance practices within these systems often favour the male lineage (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997).

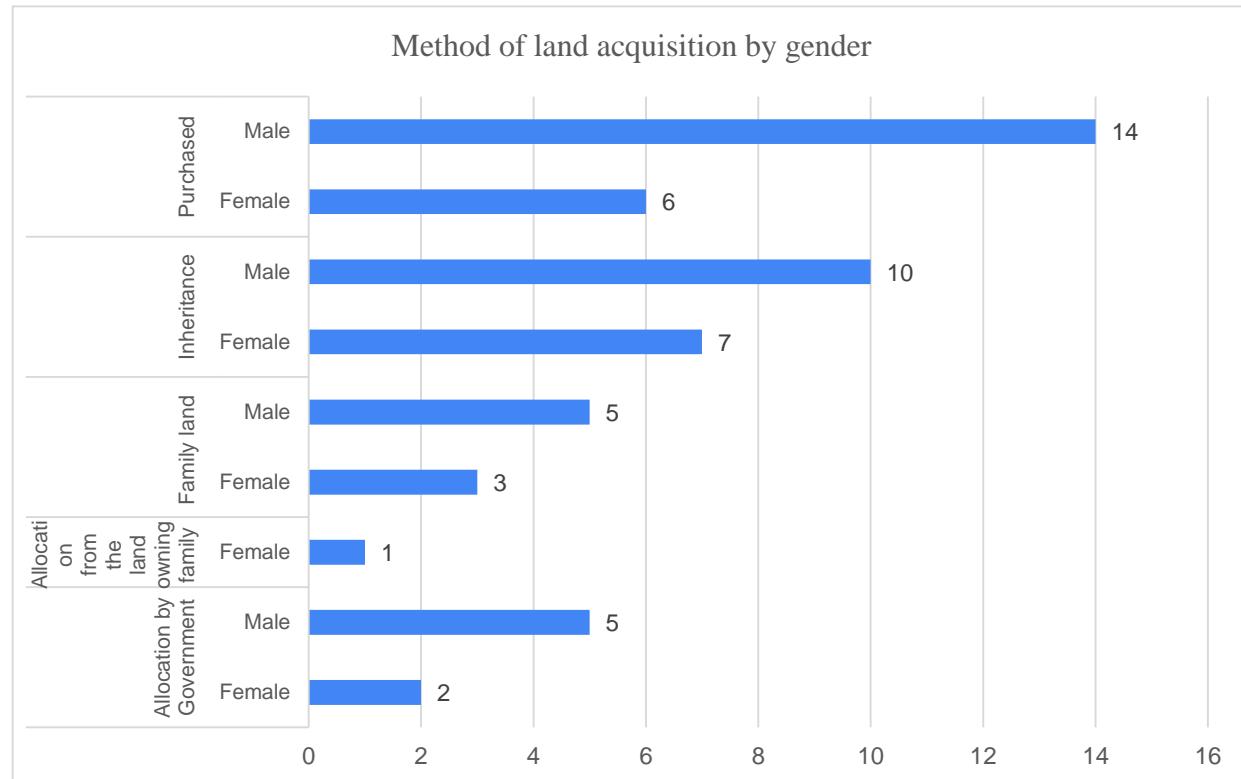
Inheritance as a key acquisition method further reinforces the significance of customary norms. Yet, as noted by various scholars (e.g., Agarwal, 1994), women's inheritance rights under customary law are often weaker or conditional, compared to men's, leading to tenure insecurity. The substantial number of respondents acquiring land through purchase reflects the increasing marketization of land in peri-urban areas. However, the influence of financial capacity on land acquisition, as observed here, can exacerbate existing gender inequalities, as women often have less access to economic resources.

The interplay of government distribution, family-based systems, inheritance, and market purchases in Grafton mirrors the complex and dynamic land-tenure landscapes described in numerous studies of peri-urban Africa (Potkin, 2012). These diverse pathways create a mosaic of tenure arrangements, each with its own implications for tenure security and gender equity. The need to address customary norms and implement gender-sensitive land policies, as highlighted by the data, is a recurring theme in the literature advocating women's land rights as crucial for their empowerment and sustainable development (UN Habitat, 2008). Understanding these local dynamics within the

broader theoretical and empirical context is essential for formulating effective interventions to

strengthen women's land-tenure security in Grafton Community.

Figure 5: Method of Land Acquisition by Gender



Data Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 5 reveals significant gender-specific tendencies in land-acquisition practices within Grafton Community, aligning with the broader literature on gender and land rights in Sierra Leone and sub-Saharan Africa (Deere & León, 2003).

The finding that fewer women (2) than men (5) reported government land allocation may reflect existing power imbalances in accessing state resources or the way government land distribution programmes are implemented, potentially overlooking the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). This disparity warrants further investigation into the criteria and processes of government land allocation in Grafton. The greater likelihood of men possessing family land (5 men compared to 3 women) strongly resonates with the well-documented prevalence of patriarchal norms within customary tenure systems (Berry, 1993; Agarwal, 1994). As discussed earlier,

family land in Sierra Leone is often controlled by male lineage heads, limiting women's direct ownership and control. Moreover, the data provides further empirical support at the local level (The Gender Hub, 2024).

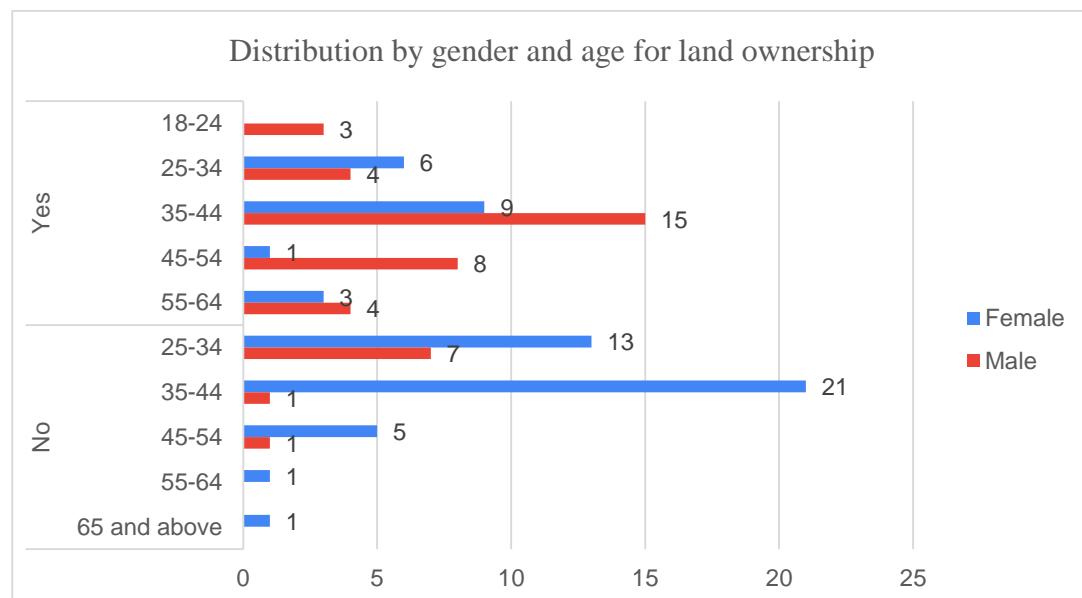
The inheritance patterns, with fewer women (7) than men (10) acquiring land through this method, also aligns with literature highlighting discriminatory customary inheritance practices that often favour male heirs (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Namati, 2015). Despite statutory laws aiming for gender equality in inheritance (Devolution of Estate Act, 2007), these findings suggest that customary norms continue to influence land transfer within families in Grafton. The most significant gender disparity is observed in land purchase, with considerably fewer women (6) than men (14) acquiring land through this means. This likely reflects the well-established gender gap in economic resources and financial

capacity, as highlighted by contemporary studies on women's economic empowerment (UN Women, 2024). Women in many African contexts, including Sierra Leone, often face barriers to accessing credit and formal employment, with this situation limiting their ability to participate in land markets (ActionAid International, 2012).

Overall, the gendered patterns in land acquisition revealed in Figure 5 underscore the complex interplay of formal (government allocation) and informal (family land, inheritance, purchase influenced by economic power) mechanisms in shaping land ownership in Grafton. These findings strongly emphasize the persistent influence of

customary norms and existing socioeconomic inequalities that disadvantage women in accessing land resources. Thus, the data reinforces the urgent need for gender-sensitive land policies and interventions that not only address legal frameworks but also actively challenge discriminatory customary practices and work towards enhancing women's economic empowerment to ensure more equitable access to land (The Gender Hub, 2024; Land for Life Initiative, 2023). Understanding these gendered dynamics in land acquisition is crucial for effectively addressing tenure conflicts and promoting sustainable livelihoods for women in peri-urban Sierra Leone.

Figure 6: Distribution by Gender and Age for Land Ownership



Data Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 6 presents a disaggregated view of land ownership by age and gender in Grafton Community, revealing nuanced patterns that align with the broader literature on evolving land-tenure dynamics and persistent gender inequalities in Sierra Leone's peri-urban areas (The Gender Hub, 2024; allAfrica.com, 2025).

The relatively equal land ownership between young women and men (18-24 years) might suggest initial access through family or community allocation before more entrenched gendered patterns emerge with age (ActionAid International, 2012). However, the slightly higher ownership among women in the

25-34 age group contrasts with the trend in older cohorts and warrants further qualitative exploration to understand the specific factors at play, such as inheritance patterns or economic opportunities at this life stage in Grafton.

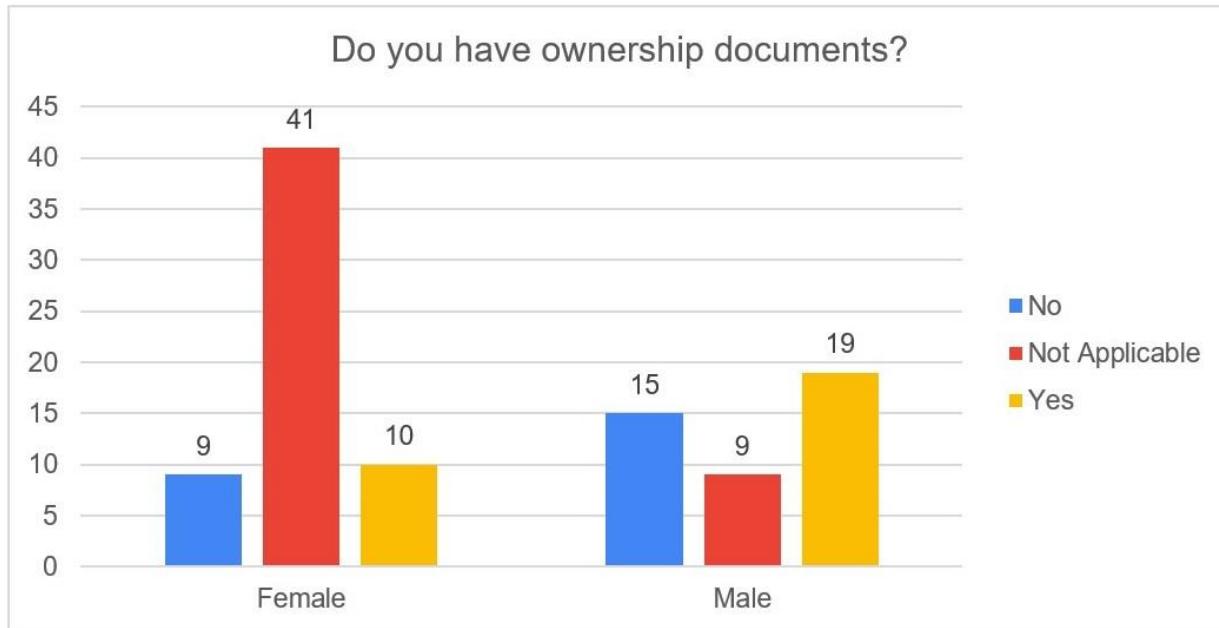
The clear gender gap favouring men in land ownership within the 35-44 and 45-54 age ranges strongly corroborates existing literature highlighting how customary inheritance practices and patriarchal norms often lead to men accumulating more land over their lifetimes, while women's access may remain tied to their marital status or male relatives (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997;

Namati, 2015). This trend is consistent with observations across various peri-urban settings in Sierra Leone where traditional systems continue to influence land distribution despite statutory efforts towards gender equality (ResearchGate, 2025).

The data also indicates a significant proportion of respondents across age groups, particularly women in the 35-44 age range, who do not own land. This lack of ownership can severely impact their livelihood prospects and access to essential resources, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks and tenure insecurity, as highlighted in studies on women's land rights and poverty reduction (UN Women, 2024). The fact that more women than men in the 35-44 age bracket report not owning land underscores the cumulative effect of discriminatory practices over time.

The findings from Figure 6 emphasize the complex interplay of age and gender in shaping land ownership patterns in Grafton. These trends highlight the enduring challenges women face in achieving secure land tenure across their life cycle, particularly as they move into older age groups where customary inheritance patterns and historical disadvantages may become more pronounced. For policymakers and organizations working to address gender-based land inequality in Sierra Leone's peri-urban communities, these age-disaggregated data are crucial for designing targeted interventions that consider the specific vulnerabilities and opportunities faced by women at different stages of their lives. This might include focusing on inheritance rights for middle-aged women or providing economic empowerment programmes to enable younger women to acquire land independently (Land for Life Initiative, 2023).

Figure 7: Possession of Land Ownership Documents: Distribution of Responses by Gender



Data Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 7 presents the distribution of land ownership documents by gender among the respondents in Grafton Community. The finding that significantly fewer women (9 out of 60) possess ownership documents, compared to men (19 out of 43), aligns with existing literature highlighting gender disparities in formal land titling across sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone (UNECA, 2003; The

Gender Hub, 2024). This lack of formal documentation can leave women in a precarious position, making their land rights more vulnerable to disputes, land grabbing and the impact of development projects (ActionAid International, 2012).

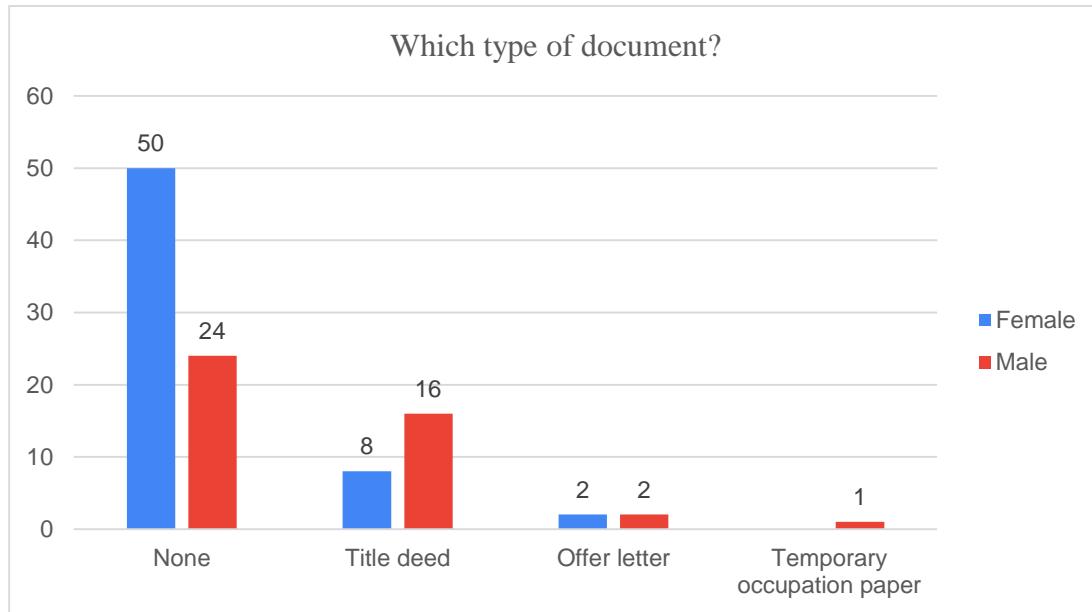
The considerable number of "No" responses for both genders regarding ownership documentation (41 women and 15 men) and the "Not Applicable" responses from men (9) underscore the prevalence of informal land-tenure arrangements in Grafton Community. As noted by UNECA (2003) and corroborated by more recent studies on Sierra Leone (SLURC, 2024; FutureLearn, n.d.), land ownership and use in many peri-urban areas are often governed by customary norms and practices rather than formal legal titles. This informality, while reflecting local traditions, can disproportionately disadvantage women because of the inherent gender biases often embedded within customary systems, as discussed earlier (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Namati, 2015). Women may have use rights granted through male relatives but lack the formal documentation that provides stronger tenure security and the ability to independently transact or leverage the land.

The fact that some men responded "No" to owning documentation despite not indicating that they do not own land suggests a scenario where they may perceive themselves as landowners under

customary law but lack formal titles recognized by the state. This highlights the potential disconnect between customary and statutory tenure systems and the challenges of formalizing land rights in contexts where informal systems are deeply entrenched (The Gender Hub, 2024).

These results underscore the critical need for gender-sensitive land policies in Sierra Leone that recognize and address the complexities of both customary and statutory tenure systems. Policies must facilitate pathways for women to obtain formal land ownership documents while also strengthening their rights within customary frameworks (Land for Life Initiative, 2023). Furthermore, fair and contextually appropriate methods for resolving tenure conflicts are essential, particularly in peri-urban settlements where land values are rising and disputes are likely to increase (FAO, 2024). Understanding the diverse land ownership realities within the community, especially the varied pathways women utilize to access and use land, is key to developing inclusive and effective land governance strategies.

Figure 8: Type of Document Owned



Data source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 8 highlights a significant gender disparity in the possession of formal land ownership documents in Grafton Community. A striking 83.3% of female

respondents reported not owning any land or land records, compared to 55.8% of male respondents. This substantial difference underscores the well-

documented challenges that women face in securing formal land titles in Sierra Leone and across sub-Saharan Africa, often because of the complexities of customary tenure systems and socioeconomic barriers (UNECA, 2003; The Gender Hub, 2024).

The fact that only 13.3% of women (8 out of 60) possessed title deeds, the most secure form of land documentation, compared to 37.2% of men (16 out of 43), indicates a significant gender gap in formal land ownership. Title deeds provide stronger legal recognition and protection of land rights, enabling owners to transact, use land as collateral and have greater security against disputes and displacement (FAO, 2024). The lower proportion of women holding title deeds leaves them more vulnerable within the existing land-tenure framework.

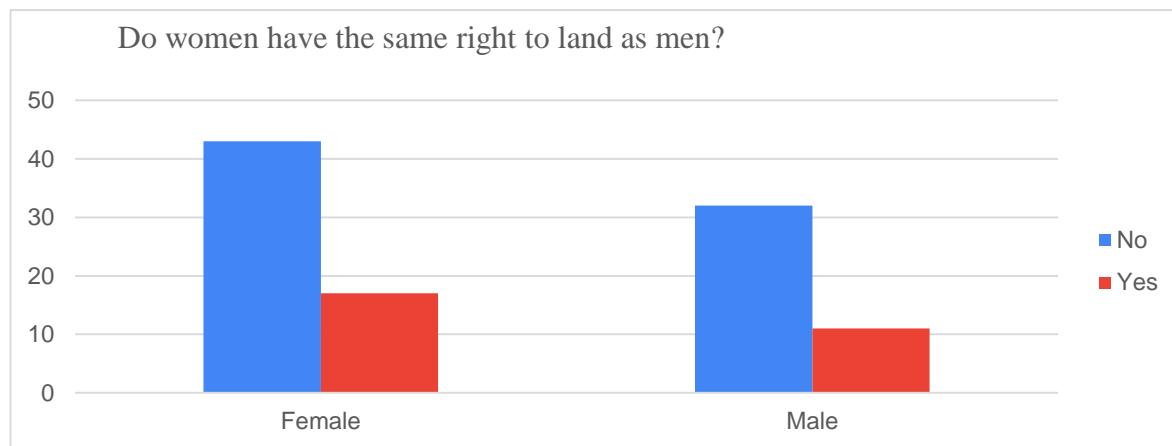
The ownership of “Offer Letters” was minimal for both genders (2 women, 2 men), suggesting this might be a less common or perhaps an initial stage in the formalization process that does not guarantee long-term security. Similarly, the single instance of a “Temporary Occupation Paper” held by a male respondent points to the diverse and sometimes less secure forms of land documentation present in the community.

The considerable percentage of both men and women without any land or land documents

highlights the overall prevalence of informal land tenure in Grafton, where customary practices often govern land access and use (SLURC, 2024). However, within this informal landscape, women are disproportionately disadvantaged because of patriarchal norms that often grant them secondary rights mediated through male relatives (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Namati, 2015). The lack of formal documentation exacerbates this vulnerability, making their land rights less defensible in the face of disputes or changing land dynamics, particularly in peri-urban areas experiencing increasing land values and development pressures (allAfrica.com, 2025).

These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that facilitate women’s access to formal land titling and strengthen their land rights within customary systems. Gender-sensitive land policies must address the barriers that women face in obtaining documentation, including issues of awareness, cost and discriminatory practices (Land for Life Initiative, 2023). Addressing these inequalities in land tenure and access is crucial for enhancing women’s economic empowerment, reducing their vulnerability to tenure conflicts and promoting sustainable livelihoods in peri-urban communities of Sierra Leone.

Figure 9: Whether women have the same land right as men



Data source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 9 presents a stark picture of perceived gender inequality in land rights within Grafton Community, with a significant majority of both female (72%) and male (74%) respondents indicating that women do not have the same land rights as men. These findings

are consistent with extensive literature documenting the persistent challenges faced by women in achieving equitable land rights in Sierra Leone’s peri-urban and rural areas (The Gender Hub, 2024;

allAfrica.com, 2025; ActionAid International, 2012).

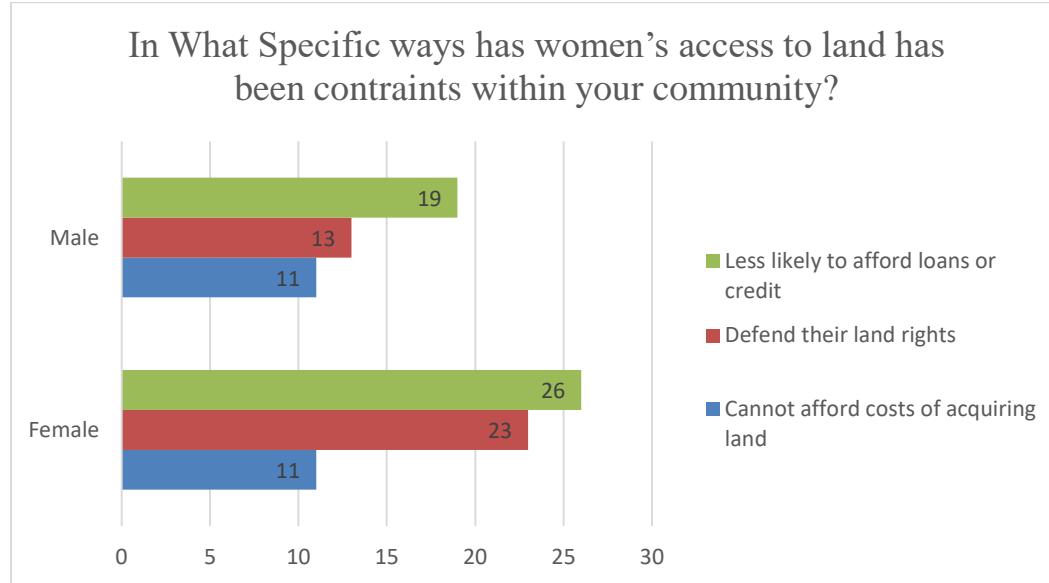
The overwhelming “No” responses from both genders highlight a shared awareness of existing disparities, likely rooted in the complex interplay of customary laws and practices that often prioritize male ownership and control over land, despite the existence of statutory laws aiming for gender equality (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Namati, 2015; The Sierra Leone Telegraph, 2022). As noted by various scholars, even with legal frameworks in place, the implementation and enforcement of women’s land rights are often hindered by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and traditional power structures at the community level (The Gender Hub, 2024).

The smaller percentages of “Yes” responses (28% of women and 26% of men) might suggest that some individuals believe in the principle of equal rights or that they are observing instances where women do have access to or control over land. However, the dominant “No” responses clearly indicate that these

are exceptions rather than the norm in the perception of the community. It is possible that those who answered “Yes” referred to statutory laws without fully experiencing their limited impact on the ground. It could also be that they might represent a minority of women who have navigated the system to secure their rights.

The strong consensus across genders on the existence of unequal land rights underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these disparities in Sierra Leone’s peri-urban settlements. These interventions must go beyond legal reforms and actively engage with customary institutions, challenge discriminatory social norms, and empower women economically and legally to claim their rightful access to and ownership of land (Land for Life Initiative, 2023; UN Women, 2024). The insights from Figure 9 emphasize the critical importance of focused initiatives that support women’s equitable land rights as a fundamental step towards achieving gender equality and sustainable livelihoods in these communities.

Figure 10: In what specific ways has women’s access to land been a constraint within your community?



Data source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Figure 10 reveals a significant level of agreement between male and female respondents in Grafton Community regarding the challenges faced by women in accessing land. Notably, equal numbers of men and women (11 each) identified the

difficulty in covering the costs of purchasing land as a limitation for women. This aligns with the broader literature indicating that women in Sierra Leone often have less access to financial resources and economic opportunities compared to men, a

situation that hinders their ability to participate in land markets (Boserup, 1970; UN Women, 2024; National Study on Women's Access to Financing in Sierra Leone, 2025).

While both genders acknowledge the difficulties faced by women in protecting their land rights, a larger proportion of women (23) than men (13) perceived this as a limitation. This disparity in perception may stem from women's direct experiences with tenure insecurity and the challenges of navigating customary systems that often prioritize male control over land (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Namati, 2015; The Gender Hub, 2024). Women, who often access land through male relatives under customary law, may be more acutely aware of the precariousness of their rights and the difficulties in defending them against potential disputes or changes in family dynamics.

Particularly among women (26 compared to 14 men), the strong agreement that limited access to credit or loans for buying land is a significant barrier for women is also consistent with existing literature. Women in Sierra Leone, as in many parts of sub-

Saharan Africa, often lack the collateral (including formal land titles, as shown in Figure 8) and the financial standing required to access formal credit (ActionAid International, 2012; Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2023). This limited access to finance further exacerbates their challenges in independently acquiring land through the market.

Overall, Figure 10 highlights a shared understanding between men and women in Grafton about the key obstacles hindering women's access to land: affordability, protection of rights and access to finance. The stronger perception of these limitations among women underscores their lived experiences of gender-based inequalities in the land sector. These findings reinforce the need for gender-sensitive land policies and economic empowerment initiatives that specifically address these barriers, ensuring that women have more equitable opportunities to secure land rights and improve their livelihoods in peri-urban Sierra Leone (Land for Life Initiative, 2023).

Practices of Tenure Access for Women in Peri-Urban Communities

Table 1: Practices of Tenure Access for Women in Peri-Urban Communities

Respondent	Tenure System	Acquisition Method	Land Use
10	Customary	Lease from family	Farming, petty trading
20	Customary	Claiming land rights	Farming
12	Customary		Farming
14	Statutory	Purchased	Business, housing
8	Statutory	Allocation by government	Business, housing
6	Statutory	Purchased	Business, petty trading

Data Source: Field Data – Interview, 2024

Table 1 sheds light on the primary practices and narratives shaping women's access to and use of land in peri-urban Grafton, revealing a significant reliance on male relatives, a finding consistent with much of the literature on gender and land rights in Sierra Leone and sub-Saharan Africa (Deere & León, 2003; Agarwal, 1994; The Gender Hub, 2024). The consistent emphasis on the necessity of male relatives (husbands, fathers, brothers) granting women access to land underscores the deeply embedded patriarchal values and traditional gender

roles that often position men as primary landowners and decision-makers within these communities (Williamson et al., 2010). This dependence inherently restricts women's autonomy and control over a crucial resource for livelihoods and empowerment.

The mention of "Bora" tokens or payments required for women to access land in many societies, including potentially within Grafton's customary practices, highlights an additional financial barrier

that disproportionately affects women, particularly those with limited economic means. Recent research on "Bora" in Sierra Leone (Preprints.org, 2025) describes it as a token of respect and social obligation often expected from strangers and women from non-landowning families seeking access to land for various purposes, including farming and housing. While seemingly a minor contribution (often in the form of goods like rice or chickens), the requirement of "Bora" can represent a significant hurdle for women striving for independent access to land, thereby reinforcing their dependence on male patronage or financial capacity.

Aligning with the broader scholarly work on the intersectionality of gender, poverty and land rights (Chant, 2003) is the emphasis on how conventional gender norms, financial limitations (linked to "Bora")

and reliance on male relatives significantly impede women's access to land in peri-urban regions. These practices and narratives perpetuate gender inequality, hindering women's economic independence and overall empowerment. Addressing these ingrained cultural norms, alongside offering legal safeguards and actively supporting women in land-tenure disputes, is crucial for ensuring equitable land access. Furthermore, critically examining and potentially mitigating financial barriers like the "Bora" token, as suggested by recent studies (Preprints.org, 2025), could significantly advance women's land rights and economic prospects in these areas. Similarly, the need for legal reforms that challenge discriminatory customary practices and promote women's independent land ownership is a recurring theme in literature advocating gender equality and sustainable development in Sierra Leone (The Gender Hub, 2024; Land for Life Initiative, 2023).

Table 2: Factors influencing women's land tenure security

Factors	Impact on Women's Land Access and Rights
Land Ownership Disputes	Loss of land, reduced access
Land Grabbing	Loss of land, reduced access
Family or Community Norms	Limited land rights, dependence on male relatives
Legal Measures	Potential resolution, but resource-intensive
Payment of "Bora" Tokens	Loss of land, reduced access, limit income activity
Limited Legal Recognition	Loss of land, high legal cost, displacement
Suspension of Farming	Disruption of livelihood
Dependence on Male Relatives	Sexual harassment, Domestic violence

Data source: Field Data – Interview, 2024

Table 2 shows the factors impeding women's land-tenure security in Grafton, contrasting them with the limitations faced by men. The data strongly suggests that women encounter distinct and often more severe obstacles in accessing and securing land rights, with these obstacles being primarily rooted in prevailing gender roles and cultural norms, a finding well-supported by literature on land tenure in Sierra Leone (The Gender Hub, 2024; Namati, 2015).

Clearly, a central theme in the literature is women's reliance on male relatives (husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles) for land access, as highlighted by Omirin (2003) and echoed in Table 1. This dependence, often stemming from patriarchal values that position men as land custodians, limits women's independent access and control, aligning with observations across various African contexts (Agarwal, 1994). The lack of a male figure can

indeed further restrict a woman's ability to claim or inherit land within customary systems that prioritize the male lineage (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997). Cultural norms and societal beliefs that ascribe fewer property rights and decision-making power to women reinforce this imbalance, thus perpetuating the notion of male dominance in land governance (Williamson et al., 2010).

The requirement for non-landowning women to pay "Bora" tokens for land access, also noted in Table 1 and supported by recent research (Preprints.org, 2025), represents an additional financial burden that disproportionately affects women, further hindering their ability to secure land, especially those with limited economic resources.

Interestingly, Table 2 suggests that the limited legal recognition of land rights under customary systems affects both men and women, reflecting the broader challenges of navigating the interface between customary and statutory tenure in Sierra Leone (SLURC, 2024). However, the impact of this limited recognition may be more severe for women who already face disadvantages within customary structures.

The disruption of farming activities due to disputes, as reported by numerous participants, significantly impacts livelihoods, particularly for women, who constitute the larger percentage of agricultural labourers in peri-urban Sierra Leone (SciSpace, 2020). These disruptions directly threaten food security and income generation, thus underscoring the vulnerability of livelihoods dependent on land access (UNHCR, 2008).

Also noted are the financial consequences of these conflicts, especially for women. Losing access to land because of disputes translates to the reduced income or increased costs associated with seeking legal or social remedies. This conclusion aligns with literature demonstrating how tenure insecurity disproportionately affects women's economic stability and their ability to provide for their families (IIED, 2008). The interruption of income-generating activities, such as farming or small-scale trading reliant on land, further exacerbates their financial vulnerability.

The analysis rightly emphasizes the critical need for a support system that mitigates the financial

repercussions of tenure disputes. This system will incorporate accessible dispute resolution mechanisms, legal safeguards for protecting women's land rights within both statutory and customary frameworks (The Gender Hub, 2024), and safety nets that preserve women's livelihoods during periods of conflict-induced landlessness. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for promoting women's land-tenure security and fostering sustainable development in peri-urban Sierra Leone.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The conclusions drawn from this study, while aiming to contribute to the understanding of women's land-tenure security in Sierra Leone's peri-urban Grafton Community, reveal a notable disconnect between the study's objectives, the scope of the collected data and the breadth of the findings presented. This limitation, stemming primarily from the acknowledged inadequacies of the survey instrument and the resultant reliance on descriptive analysis, necessitates a cautious interpretation of the study's overall contribution to existing knowledge. While the study aspired to build upon the existing body of work on land-tenure security, particularly for women in peri-urban contexts (e.g., Lund, 2008; The Gender Hub, 2024), its empirical contribution is constrained by the limited range of variables comprehensively explored. The study's ambition to offer "important new understandings" is partially met through the descriptive analysis of land ownership patterns and perceptions of gendered land rights. However, the lack of in-depth exploration into crucial socioeconomic, cultural and legal dimensions, as highlighted in the review of the findings, restricts the depth and novelty of these understandings.

The study's engagement with theoretical frameworks, while mentioned, is not explicitly woven into the concluding statements in a way that clearly demonstrates how these frameworks (e.g., feminist legal theory, agrarian political economy) provided an analytical lens for interpreting the findings. For instance, while the conclusion mentions the restriction of women's land rights by customs and traditional gender roles, it does not explicitly link this back to theoretical concepts explaining the persistence of patriarchal norms

within land tenure systems (e.g., Agarwal's work on the "patriarchy and the land nexus," 1994). Similarly, the identified obstacles of poverty and financial inaccessibility could be more explicitly connected to broader theoretical discussions on the feminization of poverty and its impact on resource access (Boserup, 1970; Chant, 2003).

The conclusion that weak land administration systems and a lack of gender-sensitive land laws contribute to women's vulnerability aligns with existing literature on land governance in Sierra Leone (SLURC, 2024; The Gender Hub, 2024). However, the study could have strengthened this by explicitly referencing theoretical perspectives on the role of the state and legal frameworks in shaping gendered land rights (e.g., discriminatory institutionalism).

Based on the identified findings and acknowledging the study's limitations, a number of recommendations are offered, as informed by the literature and aiming to address the identified constraints. One, it is necessary to *challenge traditional gender roles and promote women's empowerment through holistic approaches*. To address the deeply ingrained cultural and marital customs restricting women's land rights, interventions must go beyond education and training. Drawing on feminist empowerment frameworks (Rowlands, 1997), programmes should incorporate legal literacy, leadership development and the creation of women's support networks to challenge patriarchal norms and enhance women's agency in claiming their land rights. Also crucial is engaging men and traditional leaders as allies in this process, as suggested by recent gender transformative approaches (Barker et al., 2010).

Two, it is essential to strengthen land governance systems with a gender-transformative approach. Processes for improving land registration, as well as using cadastral mapping and dispute resolution mechanisms, must be explicitly gender-sensitive. This involves not only ensuring women's participation in these processes but also actively addressing biases within the systems themselves. Drawing on literature on good land governance (e.g., UN Habitat, 2007), reforms should prioritize transparent and accountable processes, provide legal aid specifically for women facing land

disputes, and ensure that customary land registration processes recognize and protect women's individual and collective land rights, thus moving beyond focusing solely on male household heads (Deere et al., 2017).

Three, there is a need to develop and implement comprehensive gender-just land laws and policies. While Sierra Leone has made some progress in enacting laws protecting women's land rights, effective implementation and enforcement remain critical (The Gender Hub, 2024). Future policy development should be informed by feminist legal theory, such that laws not only address direct discrimination but also challenge indirect discrimination embedded in customary practices. This includes enacting specific provisions for women's inheritance rights in both statutory and customary settings, thereby ensuring their equal participation in land management bodies and providing mechanisms for legal redress that are accessible and affordable for women (CEDAW, 1979).

Four, it is important to foster women's economic empowerment for enhanced land access. Supporting women's economic empowerment is crucial for enabling them to independently acquire and secure land rights. This process involves providing access to financial services (beyond microfinance, exploring access to larger loans and grants), agricultural inputs and training tailored to women's needs, as well as promoting women's participation in land-related value chains. Drawing on literature linking economic empowerment and land rights (Doss et al., 2015), interventions should focus on creating pathways for women to accumulate assets and challenge the financial barriers limiting their ability to purchase land and secure formal titles.

In conclusion, while this study provides a valuable snapshot of land-tenure security for women in peri-urban Grafton, future research with more robust methodologies, informed by relevant theoretical frameworks and engaging more deeply with the socio-cultural and legal complexities, is needed to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding. The recommendations offered aim to build upon the initial findings and contribute to more effective and gender-equitable land governance in the community.

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