

Integrating Sustainable Carbon Farming and Gender Equality: A Critical Interdisciplinary Review

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Abstract: *Sustainable carbon farming has emerged as a vital strategy in combating climate change, enhancing soil health, and promoting ecosystem resilience. However, the intersection of carbon farming practices with gender equality remains underexplored. This review synthesizes interdisciplinary research on how sustainable carbon farming initiatives impact, and are impacted by, gender dynamics, particularly in rural and agrarian societies. Drawing on over twenty academic sources from environmental science, gender studies, and agricultural economics, the paper develops a dual-framework analysis—ecological sustainability and gender inclusion—to explore the synergies and conflicts in implementing gender-equitable carbon farming policies. The findings show a critical gap in equitable participation, benefit-sharing, and decision-making roles for women, despite their central role in land stewardship. The study concludes with policy recommendations for mainstreaming gender into carbon farming programs, stressing the need for participatory models, capacity-building, and equitable access to climate finance.*

Keywords: carbon farming, climate-smart, equality, gender, women, environmental justice

INTRODUCTION

The global urgency to mitigate climate change has propelled sustainable agricultural innovations to the center of environmental policy and practice. Among these innovations, carbon farming—a

suite of agricultural practices aimed at enhancing soil carbon sequestration and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions-has emerged as a promising strategy in achieving climate-smart agriculture [1, 2]. These practices, which include conservation tillage, cover cropping, agroforestry, biochar application, and improved grazing, not only offer ecological benefits but also hold potential for transforming degraded lands, increasing food security, and promoting rural development.

At the same time, there is an increasing global recognition that effective climate action must be socially inclusive and just, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 13 on climate action [3, 4]. However, the integration of gender equality into carbon farming initiatives remains significantly underdeveloped. Although women play a central role in smallholder agriculture-contributing up to 60–80% of food production in some regions—they continue to face systemic barriers to land ownership, agricultural extension services, access to climate finance, and decision-making power [5, 6].

Despite the ecological and social promise of carbon farming, gendered perspectives are often marginalized in both the design and implementation of such interventions. Policies and projects frequently adopt a gender-neutral stance, assuming equal access and benefit among all participants—an assumption that fails to reflect lived realities. As a result, carbon farming initiatives can unintentionally reinforce pre-existing inequalities, excluding women from participation, leadership, and the economic benefits of carbon markets [7].

This review seeks to fill this critical gap by systematically analyzing the intersection between sustainable carbon farming and gender equality, using an interdisciplinary lens that bridges environmental science, political ecology, and feminist theory. Specifically, it aims to:

- Examine the extent to which current carbon farming frameworks incorporate gender-responsive principles;
- Identify structural and cultural barriers that inhibit women’s participation in carbon farming initiatives;
- Highlight successful models and case studies that demonstrate the potential of gender-inclusive carbon farming practices; and,
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for more equitable, resilient, and sustainable climate action strategies.

Through this lens, the paper advocates for a shift toward gender-transformative approaches that not only include women in carbon farming projects but also empower them as agents of environmental change and decision-makers in the global climate agenda.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an **eco-feminist political ecology framework**, a lens that critically analyzes the interconnections between environmental degradation, gendered power relations, and socio-political structures. As established by [8], eco-feminist political ecology recognizes that environmental challenges are not gender-neutral. Rather, they are embedded in historical and structural inequalities that disproportionately impact women, especially in rural and agrarian communities. These inequalities are further entrenched by colonial legacies, neoliberal land policies, and technocratic climate solutions that often marginalize local knowledge and female labor contributions.

Eco-feminist political ecology thus challenges the dominant technocentric and market-oriented narratives in carbon farming by advocating for **inclusive, rights-based, and justice-oriented** approaches to sustainability. Within this framework, environmental degradation and gender oppression are seen as co-produced by **patriarchal and capitalist systems** that commodify both nature and women's labor. Carbon farming, when implemented without gender sensitivity, risks replicating these exploitative patterns through male-dominated governance structures, unequal land tenure, and restricted access to climate finance.

In addition to eco-feminism, this study incorporates **intersectionality theory** [9] to deepen the analysis of differentiated experiences. Intersectionality reveals how women's experiences in agricultural systems are shaped not solely by gender but by a **constellation of intersecting identities**-including class, ethnicity, age, caste, and marital status. For instance, an indigenous widowed woman in a forest margin zone may face significantly more barriers to participating in carbon farming schemes than a married woman in a peri-urban cooperative.

Together, these frameworks provide a robust theoretical base for analyzing:

- Who gets to define sustainability?
- Who controls and benefits from carbon credits?
- How do power and privilege shape participation and outcomes in climate-smart agriculture?

They also allow for a critical assessment of **climate mitigation discourse and practice**, challenging tokenistic gender inclusion in favor of **transformative, emancipatory approaches** to climate justice.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this review synthesizes the ecological goals of carbon farming with the social imperative of gender equality. It is constructed around two **interdependent axes** that represent the core dimensions of sustainable and equitable carbon farming:

Axis A – Sustainability Dimension

This axis evaluates the **ecological performance** of carbon farming interventions through three core components:

1. **Carbon Sequestration Efficacy** - The capacity of a given agricultural practice (e.g., agroforestry, biochar, conservation tillage) to increase soil organic carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
2. **Soil Health Improvements** - Includes physical (structure, porosity), chemical (pH, nutrient retention), and biological (microbial diversity, organic matter) indicators.
3. **Climate Resilience** - The ability of the agroecosystem and community to withstand and adapt to climate shocks (e.g., drought, erratic rainfall, temperature extremes).

Axis B – Gender Equality Dimension

This axis assesses the **social inclusivity and justice** elements of carbon farming practices:

1. **Land Tenure and Access:** Evaluates whether women have secure and recognized rights to land, including ownership, inheritance, and usufruct rights under both statutory and customary systems.
2. **Decision-Making Roles:** Considers the representation and influence of women in local governance institutions, farmer cooperatives, and carbon project planning bodies.
3. **Access to Technology and Climate Finance:** Measures whether women have equitable access to carbon measurement tools, extension services, mobile-based platforms, and carbon credit revenues or subsidies.

Framework Application: Integrated Evaluation Matrix

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he intersection of these axes creates a **conceptual matrix** that can be applied to analyze specific carbon farming interventions or projects across four quadrants:

Quadrant	Sustainability Performance	Gender Performance	Equality Implication
A	High	High	Ideal Model (Scalable)
B	High	Low	Technocratic, Inequitable
C	Low	High	Socially Inclusive, Ecologically Weak
D	Low	Low	Unsustainable and Exclusive

This matrix aids in **diagnosing both strengths and gaps** in project design and implementation, ensuring that climate mitigation efforts are not only ecologically viable but also socially just.

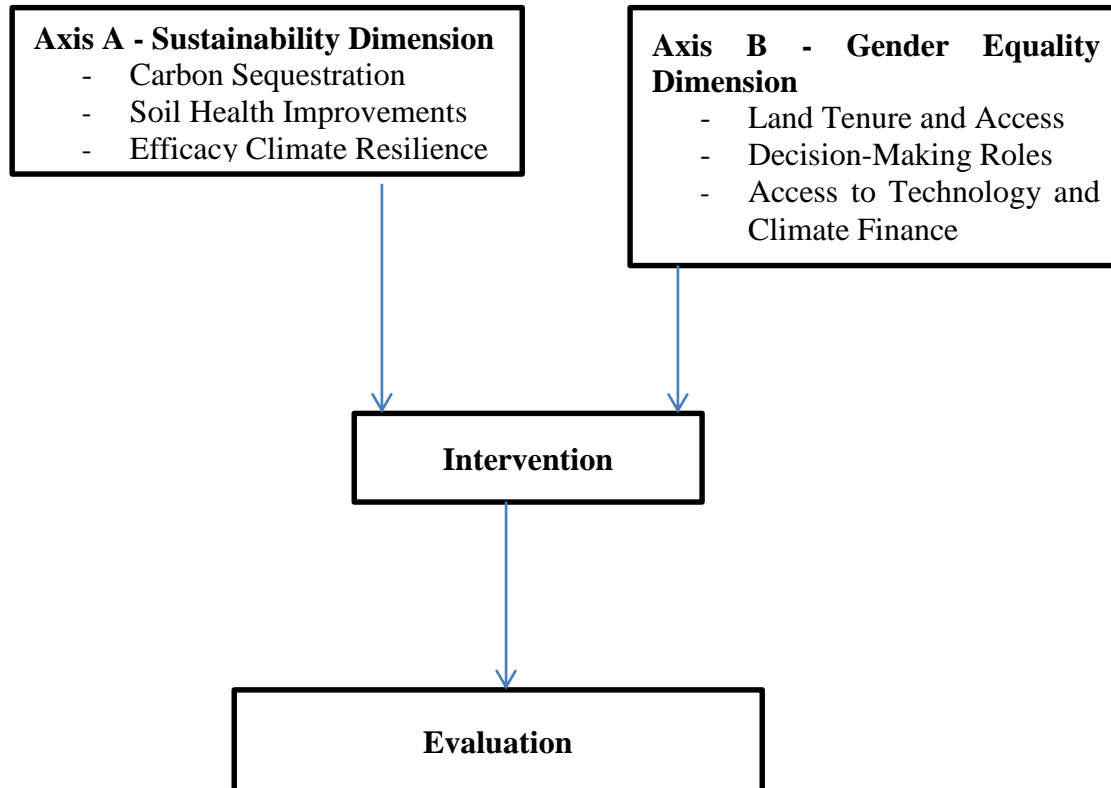


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a robust **systematic literature review (SLR)** approach aimed at synthesizing empirical evidence on the intersection of gender equality and carbon farming. The methodological process follows established academic protocols for systematic review (e.g., PRISMA 2020 guidelines) and integrates **qualitative thematic analysis** to uncover critical patterns, knowledge gaps, and policy insights.

Research Design

The research design is grounded in a **qualitative meta-synthesis** of empirical literature. A **systematic literature review (SLR)** was chosen to ensure methodological transparency, minimize bias, and allow for structured comparisons across diverse studies. The process involved three main stages:

- **Identification:** Gathering relevant studies through keyword-based searches.

- **Screening:** Filtering based on title, abstract, and inclusion criteria.
- **Analysis:** Thematic coding and cross-case comparison to extract patterns and insights.

In addition to thematic coding, **content synthesis** was used to consolidate findings across case studies, with attention to the **geographic scope, gender dynamics, ecological outcomes, and institutional frameworks** reported in the literature.

Data Collection

The data corpus comprised **25 peer-reviewed articles**, books, and grey literature reports drawn from multiple databases:

- **Academic Databases:** Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar.
- **Institutional Reports:** FAO, CIFOR, CGIAR, UNFCCC, and World Bank documents with empirical case components.

The search was conducted using Boolean operators (e.g., “carbon farming” AND “gender,” “climate-smart agriculture” OR “REDD+” AND “women”) to refine and maximize relevance.

Keywords Used:

- "Carbon farming"
- "Climate-smart agriculture"
- "Gender equality"
- "Women in agriculture"
- "Sustainable land management"
- "REDD+ and gender"
- "Agroforestry and women"

Where available, **reference snowballing** was also employed to include highly cited or relevant literature not captured in initial database searches.

Inclusion Criteria

The review included studies that met the following criteria:

Criterion	Description
Study Type	Empirical studies, case studies, program evaluations, and meta-analyses
Topical Focus	Must address carbon farming, REDD+, agroecology, or climate-smart agriculture with a gender or social inclusion lens
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional working papers, and policy reports
Language	English only
Time Frame	Studies published between 2014–2024 to capture both pre- and post-Paris Agreement developments
Geographic Scope	Global South focus (Africa, Asia, Latin America), though relevant global or comparative studies were also included

Exclusion Criteria

- Purely theoretical papers with no empirical grounding
- Technical studies with no discussion of gender, land rights, or social structures
- Non-English publications due to translation limitations
- Studies focused solely on mitigation technologies without socio-political analysis

Data Analysis

Thematic coding was conducted using **NVivo 12 software**, enabling detailed qualitative analysis of selected studies. Key themes identified included:

- Women's land tenure and property rights
- Participation in decision-making structures
- Access to carbon markets and finance
- Gender-responsive agroecological innovations
- Institutional and policy constraints

Cross-case synthesis helped categorize successful gender-integrated models, identify structural barriers, and highlight contextual variables (e.g., customary tenure regimes, donor involvement, co-benefit incentives).

Reliability was enhanced through **triangulation** with secondary datasets and policy frameworks (e.g., UNFCCC gender action plans, FAO statistics on land ownership).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Limited Female Participation

Although women contribute up to 60–80% of labor in smallholder agriculture across Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, they remain largely **invisible** in formal carbon farming initiatives [10]. Cultural and institutional barriers prevent them from participating in training programs, accessing extension services, or joining land-user cooperatives that channel benefits from carbon markets.

A key structural barrier is **land tenure insecurity**. Customary systems often place women at a disadvantage due to patriarchal inheritance laws and land registration practices that list only male household heads as owners. Without recognized ownership, women cannot participate in carbon offset schemes that require proof of land stewardship [11].

Additionally, **technical gatekeeping**—such as the use of digital tools for carbon measurement or remote sensing—further marginalizes women who may lack digital literacy or access to mobile technologies [12]. This exclusion is compounded in indigenous and ethnic minority communities, where intersectional discrimination based on gender and ethnicity is prevalent [13].

Example: In Ethiopia's Humbo community afforestation project, women were underrepresented in local forest management committees, despite their critical role in collecting biomass and sustaining agroforestry practices [14].

Gendered Benefits of Carbon Sequestration

Although women often bear the brunt of ecological degradation-such as fuelwood scarcity or soil infertility-they are typically the **last to benefit** from carbon farming revenues, including carbon credit payments or subsidies. These financial flows often pass through male-dominated community institutions, where power hierarchies determine benefit-sharing [15].

Even when women contribute equally to practices like composting, tree planting, or conservation tillage, **recognition and compensation** are rarely equitably distributed. A study in Uganda found that despite women planting 70% of trees under a reforestation initiative, less than 30% of them received payments from the resulting carbon credits [16].

Additionally, **benefits from carbon farming are not always financial**. Social capital, access to extension support, and training are also unequally distributed. Gender norms often discourage women from attending mixed-gender training or traveling long distances to project sites.

Implication: The gendered allocation of non-monetary resources (e.g., access to seedlings, extension workers) affects the **long-term sustainability** of carbon farming efforts by undermining half the farming population.

Institutional Gaps

Carbon farming policies-particularly those aligned with large-scale initiatives like REDD+ and Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)-tend to adopt a **gender-neutral** stance, assuming all participants benefit equally. However, this neutrality often translates into **gender blindness**, ignoring how structural inequality affects access, participation, and control.

For example, REDD+ programs have been criticized for **inadequate gender safeguards**, leading to elite capture by male leaders and exclusion of women from benefit-sharing mechanisms [17, 18]. Moreover, most Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) systems do not disaggregate data by gender, making it difficult to assess impacts or enforce gender commitments. Institutional designs often lack **affirmative action provisions**, such as quotas for women on carbon project governance boards, or dedicated funding for women's cooperatives to participate in carbon markets.

Observation: Without targeted gender mainstreaming, carbon farming could **reproduce the very inequalities** it seeks to mitigate, particularly in patriarchal agrarian economies.

Success Stories: Gender-Integrated Models

Despite widespread gaps, there are **notable success stories** where carbon farming has been consciously linked with gender equality-yielding both ecological and social dividends.

Kenya: The Kenya Agricultural Carbon Project (KACP)

Implemented by Vi Agroforestry and supported by the World Bank, this initiative trained over 60,000 farmers-**40% of them women**-in sustainable land management and carbon measurement. Women were actively involved in participatory mapping and soil testing, and were recognized as lead farmers in disseminating techniques such as agroforestry and mulching [19].

Nepal: Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs)

Nepal's CFUGs represent a global model for integrated forestry and gender equity. Women comprise over **50% of executive committee members** in many CFUGs, which are involved in carbon offset programs. These women have co-managed resources, engaged in carbon accounting, and ensured that revenues support female-headed households and girls' education [20].

India: Women-Led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)

In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, female-led FPOs have adopted **biochar and composting** practices, and entered voluntary carbon markets with the help of local NGOs. These organizations redistributed carbon credits to fund maternal health clinics and water access points-showing how carbon farming, when gender-inclusive, can yield broader developmental benefits [21].

Key Factors for Success:

- Inclusion of women in **project design and MRV systems**
- Recognition of **customary land rights** and collective land-use certificates
- Gender-targeted training programs in **climate-smart technologies**

CONCLUSION

Sustainable carbon farming presents a promising avenue for simultaneously mitigating climate change and restoring degraded agricultural landscapes, particularly in the Global South. By enhancing soil organic carbon through practices such as agroforestry, conservation tillage, and organic composting, carbon farming can contribute to both climate adaptation and rural livelihoods. However, the socio-economic benefits of these interventions are not inherently equitable.

Crucially, gender inequality remains a persistent barrier to the inclusive success of carbon sequestration programs. Without intentional integration of gender-responsive measures, carbon initiatives may inadvertently entrench or exacerbate existing power imbalances, especially in customary land tenure systems where women often lack legal recognition and decision-making power.

Women are not passive recipients but key agents of environmental stewardship, often managing soil fertility, crop diversity, and local knowledge systems. Excluding them from the planning, governance, and distribution mechanisms of carbon projects undermines not only social justice but

also the technical efficacy of these programs. Evidence shows that gender-inclusive initiatives result in higher participation rates, better adoption of sustainable practices, and more equitable benefit sharing.

To ensure the holistic success of carbon farming as both a climate solution and a socio-economic development strategy, the following priorities must be institutionalized:

- **Secure land tenure and resource rights** for women through both legal reform and participatory land governance models.
- **Gender-sensitive capacity building** in digital tools, soil science, and carbon accounting to bridge knowledge and technology gaps.
- **Equitable access to climate finance**, including carbon credit markets, with safeguards to ensure benefits reach women-led cooperatives and households.
- **Institutional mandates** for gender-disaggregated data, monitoring, and accountability frameworks to track progress and correct disparities.

Ultimately, **transformative climate action cannot be achieved without gender justice**. A feminist lens in carbon farming is not just a normative imperative but a strategic one—grounded in evidence that gender-inclusive approaches lead to more resilient ecosystems, empowered communities, and sustained climate benefits.

As the climate crisis accelerates, embedding equity into mitigation strategies like carbon farming is no longer optional—it is essential.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To close the gender gap in carbon farming and ensure that climate-smart agriculture promotes both ecological and social resilience, targeted and transformative policy actions are required. Below are expanded policy recommendations that draw from empirical evidence and best practices.

Policy Mainstreaming

Integrate gender equality as a **foundational principle** in all carbon farming-related policy instruments, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), REDD+ frameworks, and climate-smart agriculture strategies.

- Governments should **mandate Gender Action Plans (GAPs)** in all climate initiatives, not as optional add-ons but as performance-based requirements tied to funding disbursement (UNFCCC, 2019).
- For instance, the **FCPF Carbon Fund** has implemented gender integration guidelines that can serve as templates for national and local adaptation.
- Policies must ensure that women are **formally represented** in all decision-making bodies overseeing land use and carbon finance.

Gender-Sensitive Land Reforms

Land tenure insecurity is one of the most persistent barriers to women's participation in carbon farming.

- Legal reforms should **recognize women's ownership and inheritance rights** in both statutory and customary systems.
- Examples from Rwanda and Ethiopia demonstrate that **joint land titling policies**, which register both spouses' names, significantly improve women's agricultural investment and access to incentives (Ali et al., 2014).
- Governments should establish **community-based adjudication committees** with gender parity to mediate land disputes and document tenure.

Capacity Building

Targeted training programs must reflect the **different knowledge needs and barriers** experienced by women in agriculture.

- Extension services should develop **female-friendly curricula** in local languages and integrate indigenous knowledge with scientific practices.
- Training should focus on **soil carbon sampling, biochar application, agroecological design**, and use of digital tools for carbon monitoring.
- Programs like the **Women in Agroecology Leadership for Conservation (WALC)** in Central America exemplify how mentorship and peer learning can empower rural women farmers.

Equitable Financing

Climate finance must be **restructured** to enable women's access to credit, insurance, and carbon markets.

- Establish **dedicated financial mechanisms** such as gender-responsive climate funds or grants for women's cooperatives engaged in carbon farming.
- Create **low-barrier application processes** for smallholder women farmers to participate in carbon credit programs—simplifying language, reducing collateral requirements, and offering mobile-based submissions.
- Public-private partnerships should offer **matching grants, micro-insurance**, or revolving loans tailored to gender-specific constraints in climate resilience farming.

Monitoring and Accountability

Transparent and inclusive data practices are key to tracking and correcting gender imbalances.

- Require **gender-disaggregated data** in reporting on land ownership, benefit-sharing, training participation, and income from carbon credits.
- Develop **impact evaluation frameworks** that track how projects affect power dynamics within households and communities, not just carbon outcomes.

- Use **participatory monitoring tools**, including gender audits and community scorecards, to enable local women to evaluate program impacts and ensure accountability from implementing agencies.

These policy recommendations are not standalone fixes but interdependent levers for transformative change. By aligning gender equity with carbon farming goals, policymakers can ensure that climate action is not only effective but also just and inclusive.

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