

Drivers Of Land Conflict Progression Among Households In Kigezi Region, Uganda

Dr Arinaitwe Julius

Metropolitan International University

Abstract

Land conflict remains one of the most pervasive and destabilizing forces in Uganda's rural communities, undermining household welfare, social cohesion, and economic productivity in ways that formal statistics inadequately capture. In Kigezi Region-a densely populated highland area in south-western Uganda comprising Kabale, Kisoro, Rukiga, and Rubanda districts; the combination of land scarcity, population pressure, cultural inheritance norms, gender discrimination, and weak land governance creates a particularly volatile conflict environment where disputes routinely spiral from minor boundary disagreements into multigenerational feuds that consume families financially, emotionally, and socially. This qualitative study investigates the drivers of land conflict progression among households in Kigezi Region, employing an interpretive phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences, emotions, perceptions, and coping strategies of community members enmeshed in land disputes. Data were collected through 42 in-depth interviews and 6 focus group discussions with purposively sampled participants including household heads, women, youth, elders, local council leaders, and land tribunal officers. Thematic analysis using NVivo 12 was employed to generate rich, grounded interpretations of conflict progression dynamics. Findings reveal that land conflicts in Kigezi Region are driven by a complex interplay of inheritance disputes, boundary encroachments, population-induced land fragmentation, corruption in land administration, gender discrimination in land rights, alcohol-fuelled dispute escalation, and the emotional trauma of displacement and dispossession. Participants described feelings of helplessness, anger, shame, and hopelessness that compound material losses and generate intergenerational cycles of grievance. The study concluded that addressing land conflict in Kigezi Region requires not only legal and administrative reforms but culturally sensitive, trauma-informed conflict transformation approaches that address the emotional and relational dimensions of land dispossession alongside its legal manifestations.

Keywords: Land Conflict, Kigezi Region, Uganda, Qualitative Research, Inheritance Disputes, Land Fragmentation, Gender and Land, Conflict Progression, Land Administration, Rural Livelihoods, Patrilineal Inheritance, Corruption

1.0 Introduction and Background

Land is not merely an economic asset in Kigezi Region-it is identity, dignity, ancestral memory, and the material foundation of household survival. The Bakiga people of this highland region have for generations defined themselves through their relationship with the land: cultivating steep hillside terraces carved with extraordinary labour from volcanic escarpments, inheriting plots from fathers and grandfathers, and burying their dead on family land that

Received: 06.09.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published on: 30.09.2026

anchors the living to their lineage. When land conflicts erupt as they do with increasing frequency and severity across Kabale, Kisoro, Rukiga, and Rubanda districts-they threaten not only livelihoods but the entire social and emotional architecture through which individuals understand who they are and where they belong. To lose one's land in Kigezi is, in a very real sense, to lose one's place in the world.

Uganda's land governance framework, anchored in the Land Act (1998) and the National Land Policy (2013), recognized four land tenure systems: customary, freehold, mailo, and leasehold. In Kigezi Region, customary tenure predominates overwhelmingly, with land rights transmitted through patrilineal inheritance patterns that have become increasingly contested as population growth intensifies pressure on a finite and already highly fragmented land base. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics records average land holding sizes in Kabale District of less than 0.5 hectares per household among the smallest in East Africa creating conditions in which every boundary stone and every inheritance allocation carries enormous financial and emotional stakes. When families of six or eight or ten must survive on half a hectare of steeply sloped agricultural land, disputes over who owns which portion become disputes over who survives.

The scale of land conflict in Kigezi Region is staggering. The Uganda Land Alliance (2022) reports that Kabale's LC2 and LC3 courts collectively handle over 3,400 land dispute cases per year — a figure that almost certainly represents only a fraction of actual conflicts, since many disputes are never formally reported, are resolved through informal negotiation, or simmer unaddressed for years before exploding into overt conflict. The district land office in Kabale receives an average of 47 new boundary complaint filings per week, with most involving inheritance-related boundary disputes between family members. These numbers represent not administrative statistics but human lives: relationships destroyed, sleep lost, money borrowed and unpaid, children's school fees consumed by legal costs, and communities fractured along lines that may never fully heal.

This qualitative study was designed not to measure land conflict through aggregate statistics but to understand it from the inside through the voices, feelings, perceptions, and experiences of the men and women whose lives are shaped by it. By employing interpretive phenomenological analysis and prioritising participant narratives over external researcher categorisation, the study generates the kind of contextually embedded, emotionally grounded understanding that is essential for designing conflict interventions that actually work in the complex social terrain of Kigezi Region communities. The study positions itself explicitly within a tradition of scholarship that takes the subjective experience of land conflict as seriously as its material and legal dimensions, recognising that solutions which address only the latter while ignoring the former are incomplete and ultimately unsustainable.

The research was guided by three overarching questions: What are the primary drivers that initiate and escalate land conflicts among households in Kigezi Region? How do participants experience the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of land conflict progression? And what institutional, cultural, and relational factors determine

Received: 06.09.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published on: 30.09.2026

whether conflicts are resolved, contained, or allowed to escalate into chronic, intergenerational disputes? The answers that emerged from the data are rich, complex, and often deeply painful-they demand to be heard not only by researchers but by the policymakers, community leaders, and legal practitioners whose decisions shape the environments in which land conflicts unfold.

2.0 Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1 Land Conflict as a Social and Emotional Phenomenon

The dominant discourse on land conflict in sub-Saharan Africa has historically been framed in legalistic and economic terms as a problem of tenure insecurity requiring statutory solutions, or as a resource competition requiring market mechanisms and formal titling programmes (Kazaara & Julius, 2025). This framing, while not without value, systematically underweights the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of land conflict that give it much of its destructive power and its extraordinary resistance to purely legal remedies (Peters, 2004; Boone, 2014). Land conflicts in rural African contexts are simultaneously economic disputes, social ruptures, identity crises, and emotional traumas particularly when they occur within families or between neighbours whose social relationships span generations. Any analytical or policy framework that fails to engage with this complexity is doomed to produce interventions that address the legal surface of conflicts while leaving their social and emotional roots intact and festering.

Feminist political ecology has contributed important theoretical tools for understanding the gendered dimensions of land conflict, demonstrating how patriarchal inheritance systems and male-dominated dispute resolution institutions systematically disadvantage women in land conflicts in ways that economic analysis alone cannot capture (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). The Kigezi Region context offers a particularly clear illustration of these dynamics: a patrilineal inheritance system that positions women as temporary occupants of land even after decades of residence and cultivation, combined with local council courts dominated by male elders, creates a compounded disadvantage for women that this study's participant accounts document with painful specificity.

2.2 Historical Context of Land in Kigezi

Understanding land conflict in Kigezi Region requires appreciation of its distinctive historical trajectory. The precolonial Bakiga social system organised land access primarily through lineage membership and clan affiliation, with community elders mediating disputes through customary processes that combined restitution, social sanction, and ceremonial reconciliation. Colonial land administration, introduced under British rule in the early twentieth century, disrupted these customary systems by imposing formal boundary surveys in some areas while leaving others in legal ambiguity, and by introducing individual property concepts that competed with communal tenure logics without replacing them. The postcolonial state has further complicated this landscape by layering statutory land

Received: 06.09.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published on: 30.09.2026

frameworks over partially intact customary systems without providing the institutional infrastructure surveyors, legal aid, accessible courts necessary to make the statutory framework functional for rural smallholders.

The result is a tenure system that Tumushabe et al. (2018) characterise as "institutionally plural and practically ambiguous"-a situation in which individuals with overlapping claims to the same piece of land can simultaneously cite customary inheritance norms, LC court decisions, occupation history, and statutory title documents, all with some degree of legal standing and none definitively overriding the others. This institutional pluralism is not merely an academic observation but a lived reality that participants in this study described as a primary driver of conflict progression: when multiple legitimating frameworks are available, disputes over which framework applies become as contentious as the underlying land claims themselves.

2.3 Previous Research on Kigezi Land Conflicts

Prior research on land conflict in Kigezi has documented the general scale and distribution of disputes (Uganda Land Alliance, 2022), examined the effectiveness of formal dispute resolution mechanisms (Asiimwe, 2019), and analysed the gendered dimensions of land access (Namubiru-Mwaura, 2014). However, systematic qualitative research exploring the drivers of conflict progression particularly its emotional and relational dimensions from the perspective of directly affected community members has been limited. This study addresses that gap, building on existing quantitative and policy-focused research by adding the depth of phenomenological inquiry that reveals not just what conflicts occur but how they feel from the inside and why they escalate in the ways they do.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design, which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and the personal and social meanings they attach to phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is particularly well-suited to investigating emotionally and socially complex phenomena such as land conflict, where the meaning-making processes of participants are as analytically important as the factual events they describe. Unlike approaches that seek to categorise and count experiences, IPA is committed to the particularity and complexity of each participant's account while simultaneously seeking patterns across accounts that illuminate broader social phenomena. The epistemological position of the study is interpretive and constructivist: the study does not assume that there is a single objective truth about land conflict in Kigezi Region but seeks to understand the multiple, intersecting subjective truths through which community members navigate this complex social landscape.

3.2 Participant Selection and Data Collection

Received: 06.09.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published on: 30.09.2026

Data were collected through 42 in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled participants across Kabale, Kisoro, Rukiga, and Rubanda districts. Maximum variation sampling was employed to capture the diversity of positions within which community members experience land conflict: household heads actively involved in disputes (n=18), women who had experienced land dispossession (n=10), youth who had recently inherited contested land (n=6), community elders with mediation experience (n=4), local council leaders (n=2), and land tribunal officers (n=2). Six focus group discussions were conducted with homogeneous groups separate groups of women, male household heads, and youth to facilitate candid expression within shared social contexts and to capture the collective dimensions of land conflict experience that individual interviews cannot access. Data collection was conducted in Rukiga and Kinyarwanda languages with certified interpreters, and transcripts were translated and back-translated to ensure accuracy. Each interview lasted between 60 and 150 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with NVivo 12 used to manage coding. Initial codes were developed inductively from the data rather than deduced from prior theory, ensuring that the analytical categories reflected participants' own conceptual frameworks rather than researcher-imposed categories. The coding process moved iteratively between individual interview data and the emerging thematic structure, with the research team conducting regular reflexivity meetings to examine how their own positions, assumptions, and emotional responses to the data might be shaping their interpretations. Member-checking sessions were conducted with five key participants who reviewed thematic summaries and confirmed that the interpretations reflected their experiences. The analysis generated seven primary themes that structure the findings presented below.

4.0 Results

Theme 1 — Inheritance Disputes: Betrayal within Families

The most pervasive driver of land conflict identified across all interview and focus group data was inheritance-related disputes; conflicts arising when a patriarch dies without leaving a clear or uncontested will, when widows are dispossessed by male relatives, or when adult sons contest the fairness of land distributions among siblings. These conflicts carry a particular emotional charge because they occur within the family unit; the very institution that is supposed to embody mutual support, love, and trust across time. When inheritance disputes erupt, they fracture family bonds, destroy relationships that participants had assumed were permanent and sacred, and generate feelings of betrayal that participants described with raw, unguarded pain. No amount of legal analysis can capture what it means to have your brother look you in the eye and claim the land your father stood on together.

A 58-year-old male participant from Kabale District described how a boundary dispute with his brother over their late father's land had consumed nearly a decade of his life and destroyed what had been a close and loving sibling relationship. He spoke slowly throughout the interview, pausing frequently, as though reliving events that still caused acute and immediate distress, his hands folded tightly in his lap:

My father left us this land both of us. He didn't write a will. He was not the kind of man who thought about such things. When he died I thought my brother and I would share what was there peacefully. But the first week, he came with a rope and said he was measuring from here to there. I said brother, let us sit and talk. He said there is nothing to talk about, this is my portion. That day something broke between us. Something that I don't think can ever be repaired. I cry when I think about it. Not about the land about my brother. We used to walk to church together. We used to drink together. Now we don't even greet.

(Participant 7, Male, 58, Kabale District)

This participant's account illuminates a pattern that recurred across multiple interviews that the emotional wound of family betrayal cuts deeper than the material loss of land itself. Several participants made explicit statements to this effect, insisting that their distress was less about the square metres of land in dispute than about what the dispute revealed about the people they had trusted and loved. The psychological literature on betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1996) suggests that betrayal by attachment figures those on whom we depend for safety and belonging produces distinctive psychological wounds that can be more damaging than comparable harm from strangers. The Kigezi land conflict data suggest that family-internal land disputes produce exactly this kind of betrayal trauma: the wound is not just the loss of land but the loss of the person who took it from you.

A 44-year-old woman from Kisoro described being expelled from her marital home by her brothers-in-law following her husband's death, her children forced to watch as their uncles dismantled the fence that delineated their small plot. The account she gave was not delivered in anger; it was delivered in a kind of numbed, exhausted grief that seemed to reflect years of processing an experience that remained incomprehensible to her:

They came in the morning before the children had even had porridge. The youngest one was still sleeping. My brother-in-law said this land is not yours-it belongs to our family. I said I have been living here for twenty years, I have put sweat into this soil. He said you are a woman, you are a visitor, go back to your father's people. My children were standing there watching. My daughter, she is twelve, she was crying. I held myself; I held myself because I did not want them to see me break. But inside I was already broken. There is no word I can say for what I felt that morning. Even now there is no word.

(Participant 14, Female, 44, Kisoro District)

The phrase "there is no word" appeared across multiple participant accounts as a marker of experiences that exceeded the participant's linguistic resources to describe experiences of loss, humiliation, and dispossession so profound that ordinary language felt inadequate. This linguistic inadequacy itself communicates something important about the intensity of the emotional experience of land dispossession, and it suggests that research frameworks that demand clear, articulable descriptions of harm may systematically underestimate experiences that are real and devastating precisely because they exceed articulation.

A 52-year-old man from Rubanda District described the bitterness that followed a dispute with his eldest brother over their deceased father's plot that had ultimately been resolved in the brother's favour through what the participant described as a corrupt LC court process. Five years after the resolution, the wounds were entirely unhealed:

I lost the case but I did not lose my knowledge of the truth. I know what my father intended. I know what he told me. The court decided differently because my brother has money and I do not. Now I see my brother at funerals and we sit on opposite sides. Our children don't play together. My mother is still alive and she cannot have both her sons in the same room. That is what the court did when it gave its judgment. Not just decided a land case destroyed a family. And nobody in that court cared about that.

(Participant 29, Male, 52, Rubanda District)

Theme 2 — Boundary Encroachment: The Slow Violence of Lost Inches

Boundary encroachment gradual, often incremental movement of boundary markers, fences, or cultivation lines that over time transfers land from one household to another was the second major conflict driver identified across the data. Participants described boundary encroachment as a form of slow violence: rarely occurring through sudden dramatic action but through the patient, persistent displacement of stones, the gradual advance of planting lines, and the steady expansion of structures that imperceptibly shift where one person's land ends and another's begins. The insidiousness of this process lies partly in its incremental character each individual step is small enough to be deniable and partly in the cognitive challenge it poses to the victim, who must rely on memory, social testimony, and whatever physical markers survive to reconstruct what the boundary originally was.

What made boundary encroachment particularly psychologically corrosive, participants explained, was the difficulty of catching it as it happened. By the time a household recognizes that their land has been meaningfully reduced, the encroachment has typically extended over years or even decades, making it nearly impossible to establish when and how it occurred. A 62-year-old retired teacher from Rukiga described with meticulous precision the accumulation of small violations that eventually forced him into an exhausting and costly legal process that he was still navigating at the time of the interview:

Every season I would come back from my other work and the boundary stone had moved a little. Just a little maybe twenty centimeters. You think, maybe I am wrong, maybe I am remembering wrong. The next season, another small movement. I started making marks on a tree so I could know for certain. By the time I measured properly with a tape I had lost almost one-eighth of my shamba. That is not nothing. That is where I grow my food. That is where my grandchildren will farm. When I confronted my neighbour he looked at me like I was the one who was confused. He said you are old, your memory is not good. That was the thing that made me angriest-not the land itself. That he would look me in the face and say I was imagining things I had watched happen with my own eyes.

(Participant 31, Male, 62, Rukiga District)

The accusation of cognitive unreliability being told that one is misremembering or confused appeared in several accounts as a particularly damaging element of the boundary encroachment experience. For elderly participants especially, the suggestion that their memory was failing touched on anxieties about aging, loss of authority, and social marginalisation that extended far beyond the specific land dispute. The encroachment was experienced not just as a theft of land but as an attack on the participant's status as a reliable witness to their own life and property.

Young men who had recently inherited land from their parents proved particularly vulnerable to boundary encroachment by older, more established neighbours who recognised the inexperience and social timidity of first-time landholders. Focus group discussions with youth participants revealed a pervasive sense of being targeted and exploited by older community members who understood that young people lacked the social capital, legal knowledge, and financial resources to effectively contest encroachments. One 24-year-old participant described the humiliation of discovering that his first inherited plot had been partially absorbed by a neighbour twice his age, with the account delivered in language that mixed anger with deep shame:

When my father died they gave me this piece-it was not big but it was mine, first thing I ever owned. The man next to me is sixty years. He started planting right up to where I sleep. When I went to him he laughed. He said young man, go look after your mother. In front of people in front of our neighbours. I wanted to die from shame. I am a man. This is my land. But I had no money for a lawyer and no elder to stand with me. I planted anyway, I planted as close to him as I could. Now we are fighting every season. Every season. I am so tired of it that some days I think of just giving up the whole thing and going to Kampala. But then I think-this is my father's land. I cannot give it up.

(Participant 38, Male, 24, Kisoro District)

The tension between exhaustion and obligation-the desire to escape the conflict against the felt duty to defend what was inherited was a recurring emotional theme in youth accounts of boundary encroachment. Young participants

described being caught between their rational recognition that the conflict was consuming resources they could not afford and a deeply felt moral obligation to their deceased fathers whose bequest they felt they were failing to protect. This obligation was experienced not as an external social pressure but as an internalized commitment that generated guilt when they considered abandoning it guilt that compounded the already heavy psychological burden of the conflict itself. Women who experienced boundary encroachment described additional layers of vulnerability stemming from their social position as non-members of the patrilineal land-holding group. A 48-year-old widow from Kabale described a pattern of encroachment by her late husband's brother that she was powerless to contest through any available mechanism:

He moves the stones at night. When I get up in the morning the line has changed. I have no husband to go and confront him. My sons are in Kampala. I am one woman. If I go to him he threatens me-not with words, with his manner. He looks at me like he would do something. I go to the LC and they say come back with witnesses. Who will be my witness against a man who moves stones at night? I cry and then I plant where I can still plant and I pray that God sees.

(Participant 17, Female, 48, Kabale District)

Theme 3 — Land Fragmentation and Population Pressure

Participants across all interview sites articulated a deep awareness that land fragmentation driven by generational subdivision was an underlying structural driver of conflict; one that no individual decision could resolve but that relentlessly narrowed the resource base within which disputes occurred and raised the stakes of every contested boundary. As land plots are divided among children with each generation, the plots become progressively smaller, reducing their productive capacity and raising the significance of every centimetre of boundary and every inheritance allocation. Several participants used remarkably similar language to describe this arithmetic of dispossession, suggesting that it represents a widely shared and deeply felt understanding of their community's structural predicament.

My grandfather had ten acres. He gave each of his four sons two and a half acres. My father was one of those sons. He had seven children. He tried to divide equally each of us got less than a third of an acre. Now I have four children. What do I give them? A grave plot? This is how it ends. This is where we are going. People don't fight because they are bad people-they fight because there is nothing left to share without fighting. We are not a violent people. The land has made us violent.

(Participant 5, Male, 51, Kabale District)

This participant's final formulation "the land has made us violent" is analytically significant because it locates the cause of conflict not in individual moral failure but in structural conditions that precede and exceed any individual's choices. This structural understanding of conflict causation, expressed spontaneously by multiple participants without any prompting from the research team, suggests a level of systemic awareness among community members that policy responses to land conflict in Kigezi Region have largely failed to engage. Participants did not primarily want moral condemnation of their neighbours or relatives—they wanted structural responses to structural problems.

An elder woman from Rubanda who had watched four of her children enter into land disputes with each other over the family's inheritance described the unbearable position of a parent watching their offspring fight over land that had once seemed adequate:

When I married into this land there was enough. My husband and I grew cassava, sweet potatoes, beans—enough for everyone and some to sell. Now that same land must feed three families plus what they send to the children in school. There is not enough. When there is not enough, people fight. Not because they are greedy because they are afraid. Fear makes people into people you don't recognise. I have watched my children become people I don't recognise. That is the real cost of this land problem. Not the money. The people you lose.

(Participant 41, Female, 71, Rubanda District)

Theme 4 — Corruption and Institutional Failure

Across the data, participants expressed profound disillusionment with land governance institutions local council courts, area land committees, the district land office, and formal magistrate courts. This disillusionment was not expressed as abstract institutional critique but as personal, emotionally charged accounts of betrayal by institutions and individuals in whom trust had been placed. The corruption of land governance processes through bribery, political patronage, and the privileging of powerful litigants was experienced by participants as a double dispossession: they lost their land, and they lost their faith in any mechanism for seeking redress. Several participants described this double loss as more devastating than the land dispute itself, because while land can in principle be recovered, faith in justice once lost is extraordinarily difficult to restore.

In this country justice has a price. If you can pay, you get justice. If you cannot pay, you get a piece of paper that says come back next month. I have been coming back next month for four years. My neighbour drives a good car. He has friends in the district office. Every time I think this time the truth will win, something happens. A postponement. A lost file. A new officer who needs to 'study the case.' I have given up believing that the system will help me. I farm what I can farm and I watch my back.

(Participant 19, Male, 47, Kabale District)

Received: 06.09.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published on: 30.09.2026

The characterisation of justice as a commodity something that can be purchased by those with resources and withheld from those without was perhaps the most frequently expressed sentiment across all focus groups and interviews. Participants described watching neighbours and relatives with less compelling legal cases but greater financial resources emerge victorious from LC court proceedings, while their own stronger claims were dismissed or indefinitely postponed. The cumulative effect of these experiences was a complete collapse of institutional legitimacy—a situation in which participants no longer saw formal dispute resolution mechanisms as genuine pathways to justice but as arenas in which existing social hierarchies were reproduced through legal language.

I went to the area land committee three times. The first time they said we will visit and assess. They never came. The second time a different officer said the file had been misplaced. The third time they said there had been a decision and it was against me. I asked to see the record of the decision. They said it was in an archive. I am a farmer-I cannot afford a lawyer to go and find archives. The man who took my land is the brother of a councillor. Is it a coincidence that every process goes in his favour? I don't think it is a coincidence.

(Participant 22, Male, 39, Kisoro District)

Land tribunal officers who participated in the study offered perspectives that were simultaneously self-critical and structurally explanatory. One tribunal officer described the systemic pressures that contribute to corruption in land dispute resolution with unusual candour, acknowledging the role of underpayment and political pressure in creating environments where individual integrity is routinely compromised:

We are underpaid. We have no transport to go and inspect sites. Political leaders call us and say certain outcomes are expected. When you depend on the local government structure for your position, it is very hard to resist political pressure. I am not proud of everything that happens in our processes. But I want people to understand that the corruption they see is not just individual greed—it is a system that has been designed, perhaps without intention, to produce corruption.

(Participant 42, Land Tribunal Officer, Kabale District)

Theme 5 — Gender Discrimination in Land Rights

The gendered dimensions of land conflict in Kigezi Region emerged as one of the most urgent and consistently documented themes across the data. Women participants who constituted ten of the 42 interview participants described experiencing land conflicts not merely as property disputes but as encounters with a social and legal system that fundamentally refused to recognise their claims to land as legitimate. The combination of patrilineal inheritance customs that position women as permanent guests on their marital family's land, LC court compositions dominated by

male elders, and a broader cultural norm that land disputes involving women are less serious than those between men created a layered discrimination that operated simultaneously at the cultural, institutional, and interpersonal levels.

When you go to the LC court they listen-they make notes, they say we will come and look at the matter. And they come. But when they come, my brothers-in-law give them something. I cannot say exactly what. And then the decision goes their way. I have nothing to give. I am a widow with children who need school fees. When you have nothing in this world you lose everything. That is the truth of being a woman with a land case in Kigezi. You begin already at a disadvantage and the system makes the disadvantage worse.

(Participant 22, Female, 39, Rubanda District)

Multiple women participants described the particular vulnerability of widowhood in Kigezi's land tenure system. Under customary norms, a widow's right to remain on her marital land is contingent on her good standing with her husband's family and in some interpretations on her willingness to enter into a levirate union with a male relative of her deceased husband. Women who refused such arrangements, or who were simply disliked by their in-laws, described being subjected to systematic campaigns of eviction that combined legal proceedings, social pressure, and in some cases physical intimidation.

After my husband died they gave me six months. His elder brother came to me and said there is a way to solve this-you know what I am saying. I knew what he was saying. I refused. The next month they started the process to take the land. They said my husband's children-my children-were not really his. They said I had come to the marriage already pregnant by another man. Lies. All lies. But in the court where is my evidence against their words? They are five brothers and I am one woman. Who does the court believe?

(Participant 36, Female, 45, Kabale District)

Theme 6 — Alcohol and Masculine Identity in Conflict Escalation

A theme that emerged with unexpected clarity across both male participant interviews and focus group discussions was the role of alcohol consumption in the escalation of land disputes from negotiable disagreements into violent and irresolvable confrontations. Participants described a pattern in which boundary disputes or inheritance disagreements that might have been managed through early dialogue were allowed to ferment unaddressed until they erupted typically in the context of communal drinking into confrontations that generated violence, official complaints, and the kind of public humiliation that makes subsequent peaceful resolution almost impossible.

The dispute with my neighbour about the boundary-it could have been solved. Maybe we talk, maybe we bring an elder, maybe we find a middle. But he went to the local brew place and he was drinking and he started talking about me there, saying things about my character, about my family. Someone came and told me. I was also drinking. I went there. Then things were said that cannot be unsaid and things were done that cannot be undone. Now we are in court and neither of us will ever agree and the lawyers are eating our money and the children are the ones suffering. For what?

(Participant 15, Male, 44, Rukiga District)

The social function of local brew consumption as a space for grievance expression and collective opinion formation emerged from the data as a significant but underappreciated factor in conflict escalation. Public statements made in drinking contexts about land disputes accusations, insults, characterisations of opponents carry social weight that subsequent legal proceedings cannot erase, because they shape community opinion, mobilise social support, and create the kind of public record of enmity that makes private resolution feel like humiliation.

Theme 7 — Emotional and Psychological Consequences

Perhaps the most powerful and underreported finding of this study is the depth and persistence of the psychological and emotional harm that land conflict inflicts on participants and their families. Across the interview data, participants described experiences of anxiety, depression, shame, anger, hopelessness, and social isolation that extended far beyond the duration of the active dispute and in some cases appeared to have become chronic features of their emotional lives. The study finds that land conflict in Kigezi Region is not only an economic or legal phenomenon but a significant mental health and social wellbeing crisis that current intervention frameworks are entirely unprepared to address.

I don't sleep. I haven't slept properly in three years. Every night I am thinking about the case-what they said, what I should have said, what the next step is, whether the money I borrowed will cover the next court date. My wife says I have become a different person. Maybe I have. When you are fighting for your land you are fighting for your life you cannot separate them. It enters your body. It enters your sleep. It enters the way you look at your children and wonder what you will leave them.

(Participant 9, Male, 53, Rubanda District)

My daughter stopped going to school when the trouble started. She said people were talking about our family. She was ashamed. A child of fourteen should not feel shame for something her father is fighting for in court. That broke me more than anything else to see what this was doing to my children, to know

that their lives were being shaped by something that started before they were even born and that they have no power to stop.

(Participant 26, Female, 48, Rukiga District)

These testimonies illuminate the intergenerational dimensions of land conflict's psychological impact how the distress of dispossession is transmitted through family systems to children who bear secondary trauma from conflicts they did not initiate and cannot resolve. Several participants described children who had withdrawn from school, developed anxiety symptoms, or become involved in community violence as their families' land conflicts created social stigma and economic instability. A male participant who had lost a significant portion of his land in a disputed inheritance process described the physical manifestations of sustained conflict-related stress with clinical precision:

I had a heart episode-the doctors said stress. My blood pressure is very high now. I take medication every day. Every day I take medication because of a boundary dispute. Can you believe that? I was a healthy man before this started. I walked everywhere, I farmed hard, I never had any problem. Now at 57 I am taking tablets for my heart because my neighbour moved a stone. The medical bills are almost as much as the court costs. And nobody talks about this part of the land problem. Nobody asks what it does to your body.

(Participant 33, Male, 57, Kabale District)

Coping strategies and community resilience

While the dominant emotional register of the data was pain, loss, and disillusionment, the study also documented the coping strategies and sources of resilience that participants drew upon to manage sustained land conflict experiences. These coping strategies; religious faith, social support networks, strategic withdrawal from active conflict, and cognitive reframing do not resolve the underlying disputes but enable participants to maintain functional lives and parental roles in the midst of protracted conflict, and they point toward the community-level resources that conflict transformation programmes might harness.

I gave it to God. I know it sounds simple but it is the only way I have stayed sane. I go to church every Sunday and I pray about this situation and then I come home and I try to be a good mother for the rest of the week. It doesn't fix the land problem. But it keeps me from becoming someone who does something I would regret. I see what anger has done to some of the people in these disputes. It has made them into enemies of everyone. I don't want to be that person.

(Participant 11, Female, 43, Kisoro District)

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that land conflict in Kigezi Region is a multi-layered social, legal, economic, and profoundly emotional phenomenon driven by inheritance disputes, boundary encroachments, generational land fragmentation, institutional corruption, gender discrimination, and the psychological weight of sustained dispossession each driver compounding the others in a system that generates profound human suffering across households and generations. The qualitative evidence gathered here makes clear that solutions must be as multidimensional as the problem itself: legal reforms that strengthen women's land rights and simplify dispute resolution; institutional reforms that eliminate corruption and improve local council court competence; structural responses to land scarcity including agricultural intensification support and non-farm livelihood development; psychosocial support mechanisms that address the emotional trauma of dispossession; and community-level conflict transformation programming that engages the relational dimensions of land disputes alongside their legal manifestations.

The voices of the 42 participants who shared their experiences for this study carry a moral authority that policy documents and legal frameworks cannot replicate. They are the clearest available evidence of what land conflict actually costs not in economic units but in sleep, in family relationships, in children's school attendance, in physical health, and in the quiet daily suffering of people who went to bed one night as landholders and woke up as litigants in a process they never chose and may never escape. Responding to that cost adequately is both an ethical obligation and a development imperative.

References

- Asiimwe, J. B. (2019). Land dispute resolution mechanisms in Uganda: Effectiveness and limitations. *Uganda Law Society Journal*, 12(1), 34–58.
- Boone, C. (2014). *Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Harvard University Press.
- Namubiru-Mwaura, E. (2014). Gender and land tenure in Uganda. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 6862.
- Peters, P. E. (2004). Inequality and social conflict over land in Africa. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4(3), 269–314.
- Rocheleau, D., Thomas-Slayter, B., & Wangari, E. (Eds.). (1996). *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences*. Routledge.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. SAGE Publications.

Kazaara, A. G., & Julius, A. (2025). *Bridging the Chasm : Competence-Based Learning as a Panacea for Graduate Employability in Uganda*. 9(10), 201–210.

Tumushabe, G., et al. (2018). Land conflicts and local governance in Kabale District. ACODE Land Policy Research Brief No. 12.

Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS). (2021). *National Housing and Population Census 2021*. UBOS, Kampala.

Uganda Land Alliance. (2022). *State of Land in Uganda: Annual Report 2022*. ULA, Kampala.

Whitehead, A., & Tsikata, D. (2003). Policy discourses on women's land rights in sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3(1–2), 67–112.