

# Land Grabbing: A Big Toll on Women Farmers – Case Study of Segou Region in Mali

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## Abstract

In the wake of multiple crises, including economic instability, food shortage, energy crisis, and climate change, African farmers' land relationships have undergone remarkable changes in recent years. These changes in land relationships were initially brought about by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on sub-Saharan African countries. These programmes encouraged governments to open their markets, especially in the agricultural sector, to multinational companies, claiming that this would reduce poverty and foster economic growth. Further impetus for opening up markets, particularly land markets, in the developing world was fuelled by the triple financial, oil, and food crises of the early 2000s. Based on this, the government of Mali ceded thousands of hectares of land to national and international companies ostensibly to address these problems. Using data collected in the Ségou region of Mali from 2020 to 2022, this study surveys the long-term impact of government decisions on women farmers in this region. Overall, the Malian government's cession of land to large companies has harmed small-scale women farmers. Most smallholders found themselves expelled from their farms in rural communities under the justification of community development projects, or agro-industrial ventures, usually by force. Women shoulder the burden of land deals as their land tenure access remains fragile under both statutory and customary tenure rights. Land withdrawal from small-scale women farmers who play an essential role in agriculture as food producers, processors, and marketers inevitably impacts their agency in performing their income-generating activities.

**Keywords:** crises, land deals, land tenure, Mali, women

## Introduction

African farmers' land relationships have undergone remarkable changes in recent years. The commodification of land, even in West Africa, predates the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s. Studies have shown that SAPs initiated what Moyo *et al.* (2012) have described as a second scramble for land in Africa, which prioritised the strengthening and formalisation of land markets. Beginning in the 1980s with the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes in many parts of the continent, land began to be conceptualised as a commodity that could be bought and sold. The impetus to commoditise land on the continent was furthered in the wake of multiple crises of the early 2000s: a global financial crisis linked to the real estate boom, an oil crisis caused by price volatility, uncertainty in the oil markets leading to the promotion of biofuels and agro-fuels, and lastly a food crisis resulting in pressure on food-importing countries to invest in land in other countries where land resources are available (Dutilleul, 2013). To address these problems, governments encouraged the procurement of African farmlands for food production, biofuel production, and mining purposes (Gaidzanwa, 1995; Agbosu *et al.*, 2007; Adamczewski *et al.*, 2011; Anseeuw *et al.*, 2012; McMichael, 2012; White *et al.*, 2012; Cotula, 2013; Cotula *et al.*, 2014; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017). As a result, over the last two decades, large tracts of land on the continent have been handed over to mostly foreign investors. Africa has emerged as a primary target for investors interested in large-scale land acquisitions (Nations Unies, 2010). In the Land Matrix project which records transactions that entail a transfer of rights to use, control, or own land through sale, lease, or concession covering 200 ha or larger, Anseeuw *et al.* (2012: 10) note that Africa was the most targeted region of land acquisitions; compared to land deals covering seven million hectares (ha) in Latin America and 17,7 million ha in Asia, land deals in Africa covered 56,2 million ha.

The current pace of land appropriation has sparked a heated debate among researchers and civil society advocates (GRAIN, 2008; Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; Matondi *et al.*, 2011; Borrás and Franco, 2012; Cotula, 2013). While some scholars maintain that land grabs are a continuation of colonial practices (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; Alden Wily, 2012; Cotula 2013), others

argue that land grabs are a novelty resulting from food system restructuring (Hall, 2011; Li, 2011; McMichael, 2012).

A less debated but equally important point is the outcomes of land deals across and within societies. Even less explored is the gender-based analysis of land transactions. Numerous studies analyse land acquisitions from the perspective of a household as a homogeneous unit, with assets pooled jointly and associates equally affected by land acquisition decisions (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; Hall, 2011; Li, 2011; Alden Wily, 2012; McMichael, 2012; Cotula, 2013). On the African continent, incomes are not necessarily pooled equally. As Ekejiuba (1995) has pointed out, these households operate on a separate purse phenomenon. It is thus crucial to investigate the impact of such land grabs on different members of a household.

A growing body of work by scholars such as Daley (2011), Behrman *et al.* (2011), Tsikata and Yaro (2014), and Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr (2017) is emerging on the subject. These studies show that large-scale industrial agriculture, often preceded by large-scale land acquisition, has been detrimental to women because it reorganises the uses of pre-existing natural resources and changes family production methods as well as revenue sources. In addition, women are unable to profit from these acquisitions due to pre-existing discrimination and prejudice against them. The most beneficial opportunities are often inaccessible to women. In this article, I contribute to this scholarship by focusing on Mali. This is important given the fairly unique circumstances of Mali as a largely agrarian country with around 80% of its population working in agriculture. In such an environment, the impact of large-scale land acquisitions will be more acutely felt, especially by the rural women who are expected to engage in farming to provide for the needs of their families. I contribute to the literature by focusing on both the social and economic impacts of large-scale land acquisitions in this environment.

## The Rise of Land Deals in Mali

Mali has great agricultural potential due to its fertile land and water endowment, making it an attractive place for foreign investment. During the 1970s, strains on the Malian economy led to the government's approval of the IMF/World Bank-administered liberalisation of the economy, which resulted in a focus on foreign direct investment to revamp the economy. Following the food, financial, and fuel crisis of the late 2000s, new land acquisitions have been made for biofuel and food production, with special emphasis on cotton, rice, millet, maize, and fruits.

The rise of land deals also occurs in a context of weak land governance where the State has a monopoly on the allocation and management of agricultural land. Officially, all the country's lands belong to the State. Even if leases can be revoked and the land can be taken back from the investors, the statutory laws make all land in Mali the state's property. Yet in practice, a large portion of Mali's farming lands is subject to customary land tenure arrangements where around 85% of the land is held based on customary tenure systems (Code Domaniale et Foncier, 2000). Tensions between the statutory and customary law have grown with the recent rise in large-scale land acquisitions.

Mali's attractiveness as a site for large-scale land acquisitions is evident in the sheer amount of land that has been ceded to companies in the last decade. This trend has been increasing as of 2016, an estimated 871,267 hectares had been allocated temporarily or permanently (Djiré *et al.*, 2012). Several NGOs in Mali estimate that millions of hectares of land have been ceded in recent years.

It is within this context of large-scale land acquisitions in a milieu where gender norms and relations impinge quite negatively on women within Malian households, and statutory law on land offers no reprieve, that this paper seeks to interrogate the impact of these land acquisitions on women. In what follows, the article will provide an overview of the land governance framework in Mali, highlighting the three major phases in land tenure governance and how women's land rights evolved within these systems, and discuss the research methods and the empirical data. The analysis reveals the gendered impacts of land deals on women's socio-economic activities, particularly their income-generating activities, household food security, and intra-household relationships.

## **The Land Governance Framework in Mali and its Implications for Women**

Land has a significant social function in Mali, governed by conventional systems as a source of life for humankind. Although there is a diversity of customary land tenure systems resulting from historical, geographic, and socio-cultural differences, they share several common principles. These include kinship, lineage, and seniority norms (Djiré *et al.*, 2012). Before colonisation, village chiefs managed land communally. During this period, unwritten rules governed access to land. It occurred mainly through inheritance and the village chief's allocation of a proportion of lineage land to a family or individual member of the lineage. Village chiefs could grant temporary or permanent rights to individuals outside the clan through donations and agreements. This right was initially not focused on property privileges within the scope of private property rights. Instead, it was centred on a sequence of entitlements (access, exploitation, harvesting of the land and its resources) understood communally by lineage members (Djiré, 2005). The larger the family, the more land it owned. The extent of land use depended on the needs and capacity of the family to exploit it. Conflicts that emerged were settled by arbitration and mediation through special commissions in which village chiefs appointed members. Today, local land dealings still involve district and village heads and their seniors; however, the land is stewarded by kin-based units within communities, ensuring that each person can access land for their various needs. First occupants of a piece of land benefit from usufructuary entitlements. A patrilineal system transmits these privileges from fathers to their eldest sons, who inherit the right to manage the land on their brothers' behalf. As pertains in other West African jurisdictions, women can use land meant for their relatives, but they cannot inherit it (Agbosu *et al.*, 2007). Currently, 85% of land in the country is administered by customary law through lineage systems. Although traditional law has persisted over time, it has not been formalised.

Upon French colonisation in the 1890s, the colonial administration banned customary land tenure systems by imposing its modern law and the notion of private property, disregarding the pre-colonial tenure systems that had ordered the country for centuries (Coulibaly, 2010). Following independence, Mali's newly independent government assumed that a sovereign state must control

its economic growth and thus kept all the colonial texts (Le Bris *et al.*, 1982). The post-colonial governments gradually disposed of customary rights. The evolution of regulation related to agricultural land in the post-colonial period can be divided into three main stages. The first stage was characterised by the state's absolute monopoly on land management. The second stage maintained the state monopoly and allowed local stakeholders to manage natural resources as well as recognise customary rights. The continuity of previous guidelines from the colonial tenure systems predominantly characterised the third stage (Diallo, 2022). It incorporated colonial texts while maintaining some essential elements from the customary system (Gaidzanwa, 1995). Significantly, a key principle underpinning all three stages was the Malian State's insistence that all types of land utilisation remained provisional and revokable by the government at any time.

When significant droughts occurred in the 1980s, Mali adopted neo-liberal policies under the instruction of international financial institutions. As a result, state-owned enterprises were auctioned off, leading to the rise of a "*petit-bourgeoisie*" (Nolte *et al.*, 2016). After strikes and the revolution of 1991, the 3rd Malian Republic established decentralisation, creating municipalities and promoting territorial development. Moreover, the advent of democracy in 1992 instituted new approaches to the government's attempt to reform land ownership. Another law, the "*Code Domaniale et Foncier*" (CDF), or Land Law, was passed in 2000. The Land Law and the "*Loi d'Orientation Agricole*" (LOA) of 2006 (Agricultural Orientation Law) was introduced to promote entrepreneurship and agricultural development. Innovative components of these laws echoed devolution and decentralisation approaches by confining rights to centralised local government bodies to handle their properties. Even so, the state reiterated its power to control land or all public realms, including airspace, property, and subsoil reserves (Cotula *et al.*, 2014).

Decentralisation gave mayors a lot of authority, as they could introduce real estate agencies by introducing land titles. Mayors took land from the farmers by granting or selling titles to real estate agencies, thus transforming land into collateral for the new "*petit-bourgeois*" who could get loans from banks and invest in agriculture (Diallo, 2022). In 2002, a decree allowed mayors to evict farmers, which intensified the phenomenon of land grabbing. As a result, some farmers,

particularly those in peripheral towns were expelled from their land despite a law that recognises customary rights to land (Coulibaly, 2010; World Bank, 2014).

Nevertheless, land tenure governance is not homogenous in Mali. In the southern regions of Mali, where agriculture is the dominant economic activity, farming production is governed by a customary land tenure system that differs greatly from that in the northern regions. It is mainly through clearance, inheritance, and gifts that smallholder farmers in southern Mali acquire land. Increasingly, however, leases and share agreements have become common in southern Mali, as land has become commoditised, destroying the tenuous kinship-based land securities that gave women land rights. Females' and males' relationships to land are based on social arrangements, predominantly kinship systems, and gender norms (Djiré, 2005). In the southern parts of Mali, where farming is intensively practised, traditionally, women cannot own land. Generally, women gain access to the plot via a male family member (father, husband, or brother), who determines exactly how the land must be used (Djiré and Keita, 2016). In some cases, women might have joint entitlement to the household plots with their spouse; when their male co-owner dies, this right may be constrained (Djiré, 2005). They can cultivate or use these lands temporarily. Even then, land can be taken back from them at any time, preventing many women in rural areas from participating in land improvements such as developing irrigation infrastructure, fencing, or tree planting (USAID, 2010).

Traditional Malian societies' tenure systems are based on rules that reflect the country's socio-economic, political, and cultural realities. These rules are a mixture of traditional conventions established in various communities and precepts from religious beliefs (Djiré *et al.*, 2012). Within this system, traditionally, married women had no rights to the land because their access to land would undermine the conventional household land acquisition system which was based on inheritance (Diallo, 2022). Islamic culture also hinders women's tenure rights. Nearly 90% of Mali's population is Muslim. In regions where Islam is highly practised, such as in the northern part of Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu, access to land is governed by Shariah's prescriptions. In Islam, the land is considered a sacred trust whose supreme ownership bears upon Allah. Consequently, land and natural resources are governed by two interdependent principles. Firstly, the unrestricted use of natural resources, which is not the object of any human

being's effort, should be free and cannot be traded. The second principle is sustainability, under which land belongs to the individual who sustains it by cultivating it (Diakite and Diallo, 2004).

Regarding women's access to land in Islamic regulations, they have no restrictions on owning, inheriting, using, or purchasing land. In this vein, women can receive land or property as a dowry or acquire it through inheritance, even though their shares are smaller, generally half that of their male counterparts (Chaudhry and Chaudhry, 1997). They can also manage and maintain control over their marital household and financial assets through marriage and may continue to do so after divorce or widowhood (Diallo, 2022). More importantly, women can have individual land title deeds or communal lands. These rights are evident in Islamic law, which endorses women's rights to land and property (Haddad *et al.*, 1997). Yet, in Mali, Islamic rights are neither equally incorporated into the state legislature nor applied correctly among people. Sharia laws are commonly misinterpreted by religious leaders who are generally male.

Mali's secular state has demonstrated an interest in enacting laws that ensure gender equality. This is evident in the nation's constitution, which grants equal rights and opportunities to all its citizens. In addition, the CDF grants males and females equal entitlement to possessing title deeds. More importantly, the Agricultural Orientation Law which was enacted in 2006 conveys in article 83 that 15% of state-managed land must be allotted to women, young people, and vulnerable groups (LOA, 2006).

Despite the Islamic and legal rules that enshrine women's tenure security, in reality, the reverse is the case in contemporary Mali (Djiré and Keita, 2016). This is mostly because in Mali, legal pluralism exists and the boundary between customary and legal systems is often misunderstood, resulting in profound ambiguities, conflicts, and complexities (Diallo, 2021). Consequently, women's land tenure remains challenging throughout the country. As an illustration, in an agricultural survey conducted in 2012 on the state of agriculture and farmers in Mali, men owned 84% of farm plots. Of the 16% of women landowners, 40% were in the Kayes region, 21% in Koulikoro, 20% in Sikasso, 11% in Mopti, and only 8% in Ségou (EAC, 2014-2015). The survey further stated that men have five times more plots at the national level than women. Although females own 16% of the land, it should be noted that women's plots are also tiny. Male plot



owners have an average of more than two ha, compared to 0.22 ha for women (EAC, 2014-2015).

Regarding the gender roles and norms in Mali, the actual chores performed by females and males within the household vary considerably between and within regions and agroecological zones throughout the country. In farming societies, women generally provide labour on their husbands' plots. They also work as independent operators on market gardens, which they grow and handle themselves or with their children's help. Consequently, market gardening is a significant agricultural activity for women, providing their household needs and cash (Diallo, 2021).

Women usually obtain provisional land usage entitlements for their market gardens through a male relative, which can be revoked at any time. A woman might have the right to grow crops on a plot of land to provide for her personal needs; nonetheless, she does not have primary rights over that property, which is retained by the head of the family or the customary chief. Neither does she have any legal rights over the same land (Diallo, 2022). Women can thus unexpectedly be dispossessed of their land, which they have successfully cultivated for years (Iglesias, 2020).

As a result of these tenure systems, women usually find themselves excluded and marginalised when they apply for bank loans due to their lack of title deeds to their farmland. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2013), overcoming inequalities between men and women farmers in accessing productive resources (land, inputs, labour, livestock, opportunities for education, agricultural extension agents, financial services, and technologies) would increase the productivity of women farmers by 20 to 30%. Women often create cooperatives to appeal for land for communal utilisation to address their land tenure insecurity.

As Cotula (2011) has noted for other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, climate change, desertification, and rapid urbanisation in Mali have led to a further shortage of existing farmland. This has triggered the fragmentation of existing plots, as families have traded some of their lands to fulfil their household needs. This process of farm fragmentation has led to a progressive and fundamental change in the traditional management of land rights, leading

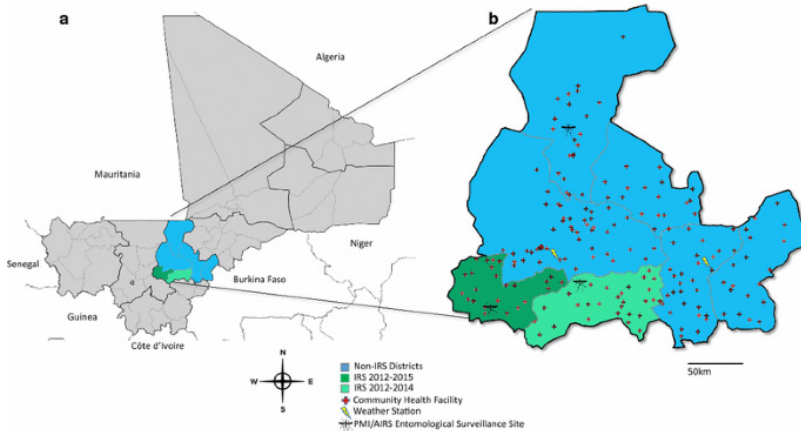
to the individualisation of agricultural property. With land grabbing rising in the country in recent years, women are the primary victims in this fiercely competitive environment, with no title deeds and often with no income or credit to rent plots whose price has become too high.

The intensification of land grabbing substantially affects women's land use rights. While in traditional systems women were guaranteed land use rights for collective or personal purposes, with the individualisation of land rights, they are generally the most vulnerable and the first to be excluded. This is as true in Mali as it is in Ghana (Tsikata, 2016). As such, persistent land shortages lead to the reclassification of women's market gardens as male-controlled household fields, a phenomenon that has been documented in both Ghana (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017) and Mali (Diallo 2021), and makes their rights as wives, mothers, and daughters untenable. This article on the Ségou region of Mali contributes to the evolving land grabbing literature by highlighting its gendered effects.

## **Study Site and Methodology**

Fieldwork in Ségou was undertaken between January 20, 2020, and February 28, 2020, as well as in April 2022. Ségou is located in the south-central part of Mali, approximately 235 km from Bamako, Mali's capital city, as indicated in map 1. It extends for more than six km along the right bank of the Niger River. The area is irrigated by two crucial waterways: the Niger and the Bani Rivers. Ségou has a hot semi-arid climate with rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season starts in May and lasts until September.

Map 1: The Ségou study site



Source: <https://bit.ly/3AYuX0P> accessed July 18, 2022

Ségou is the headquarters of the Office du Niger (ON), an extensive irrigation system that began in 1932. The ON is mainly irrigated by the Markala Dam, built by the French administration in 1947 over the Niger River, which is 4,200 kilometres long, of which 1,700 kilometres of water flows in Mali (Seufert and Hategekimana, 2013). The dam was intended to irrigate 950,000 ha of land in the central delta of the Niger River to produce 500,000 ha of cotton and 450,000 ha of rice (Traore, 2013). Following Mali's independence, the ON became a state-owned agency.

The part of Mali in which Ségou is situated is essential for agriculture due to the presence of the ON. Agricultural activities represent an integral part of the income of the inhabitants of the Ségou region. For example, the ON area's average annual household income pattern reveals that agriculture represents 83% of residents' primary source of cash income, followed by livestock breeding (12%) (*Ministère du Développement Rural*, 2014). Irrigated rice cultivation in the area has been expanded, and other crops such as cotton, sugar, millet, groundnuts, cassava, and beans are also grown. Market gardening is the dominant activity during the off-season. During this period, vegetables such as onions, cabbage,

lettuce, tomatoes, okra, eggplants, groundnuts, mangoes, watermelons, and other fruits are also cultivated.

Ségou is a densely populated region and has always been an important trading centre. With 130,690 inhabitants in 2009, it is the fifth largest town in Mali (INSAT, 2020). People reside in villages comprising 30 to 400 family units. Each household has, on average, seven to 15 workers per agricultural production unit. On average, each household grows rice or vegetables on 0.65 ha in the managed area of the ON, while 2.5 ha in the rain-fed area is used for millet or sorghum cultivation. Its rural population is mainly nomadic, semi-sedentary, or sedentary. Commerce consists primarily of the small-scale exchange and sale of products from the agricultural sector, sold weekly at the large Sudano-Sahelian market, drawing customers from far outside the city.

I used qualitative methods in my data collection. This comprised interviews that were conducted at the national level with institutional actors (government officials in different ministries and NGOs, agricultural extension agents, and local rural services) and at the community level with traditional and religious leaders, civil society organisations as well as local agricultural department officials and extension agents. A total of seven structured interviews were done. Four focus group discussions were also conducted with a total of 56 farmers. These farmers were identified with the help of agricultural extension agents as well as traditional and religious leaders who came from the following seven communities: Diodo, Markala, Sibila, Sanamadougou, M<sup>’</sup>benwany, Tenou, and Weledikila. The material from the interviews and focus group discussion was transcribed and then manually coded according to the relevant themes.

## **Land Grabbing in the Office du Niger Region**

Land grabbing has become an issue in the ON region largely due to the availability of immense fertile and irrigated land in the area, as highlighted earlier. In the early 2000s, with the encouragement of the World Bank and the IMF, Mali opened up its farmland to the international market by signing long-term leases with domestic and global economic operators to develop export-oriented crops such as sugar, wheat, and potatoes in the ON region.

Sanamadougou and Saou are two villages in the ON area largely affected by land grabbing. These two villages are situated in the rural municipality of Sibila, in the Macina district within the Ségou region. They are located 30 kilometres northeast of the Markala Dam, built by the French administration during the colonial era. Sanamadougou is a village of approximately 120 households of 20 to 30 people, totalling 3,000 to 3,500 people. The town of Saou has about 80 families with 2,000 individuals (Seufert and Hategekimana, 2013). They all belong to the same area known as the Sana, which is recognised as an important agricultural production area.

A survey conducted by the FIAN Institute in 2012 found that these two villages, which had cultivated the land handed down to them by their ancestors for centuries, lost much of it to Moulin Moderne du Mali (M3 SA), an agri-business company established in Ségou. M3 SA has occupied community land since 2010 under a 50-year lease (Traore, 2013). The deal comprises a legal document securing M3 SA's land as part of an agricultural investment project from the government's public-private partnership. The agreement is expected to contribute to Mali's food sovereignty and agrarian development, while promoting sustainable agro-industry development and livestock production in the farming community where the project is located. Through this agreement, the government makes available to M3 SA an area of 20,000 ha in the Kala hydraulic scheme without further specifying the exact location of the land (Seufert and Hategekimana, 2013; Traore, 2013). The 20,000 ha were allocated in two portions, with a specific lease for each deal signed with the ON. The first portion, 7,400 ha under lease with the ON, covers land in Sanamadougou and Saou. The contract stipulates that the State is committed to making land available "free of any legal obstacles that prevent [its] exploitation" and foresees that exploitation of the land will take into account compensatory measures if the allocated area affects certain areas such as villages, sacred places, migratory routes, and agricultural plots (Seufert and Hategekimana, 2013).

Regarding the issue of land grabbing, the people of Sanamadougou and Saou state that they were neither informed of the project's arrival in their area nor of the terms and conditions under which they had to vacate their land at the expense of the investor. They just woke up one day to find M3 SA's tiller clearing their fields and fencing off the land on which they used to farm. When

they made inquiries, they were told that the ON had allocated the land to the M3 SA company. Thus, they began a fierce resistance against the appropriation of their family land, without success. This opposition even led to the imprisonment of some farmers (Traore, 2013), all with no positive outcome. According to the people interviewed by the FIAN Institute, they have not been given any land as compensation or resettlement. They were forced to rent fields between CFA100 000 and CFA150 000 (USD155 to USD233) to produce USD200 to USD300 worth of produce (Seufert and Hategekimana, 2013). In addition, farmers with few heads of livestock were forced to sell them, as they could not feed them due to the lack of grazing land, while pastoralists had to go hundreds of kilometres to graze their herds. Other examples of large-scale land allocations to domestic and foreign investors include 20,000 hectares given to the Chinese company N-Sukala for irrigated sugarcane cultivation. This plantation is on former rain-fed land “owned” by seven Bambara villages 30 km northeast of Ségou and farmed by them under customary rights. No compensation has been paid to the thousands of displaced people for the loss of their farmland. Many families have moved north to borrow farmland in areas with less land scarcity, while others have moved to the city to find work (Toulmin, 2018).

The findings from fieldwork I undertook in the villages of Diodo, Markala, Sibila, Sanamadougou, M’benwany, Tenou, and Weledikila, in the Ségou region corroborate the work of Traore (2013) and Toulmin (2018). Only in one village (Markala) was the extent of land grabbing low according to the respondents. In Sanamadougou, much of the land had been allocated to external actors and in three other villages, the level of land grabbing was high (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Extent of Land Deals in the Study Sites**

Area	Level of land grabs	Activities	Male	Female
Diodo	+	Market gardening	4	3
Markala	-	Market gardening and marketing	2	2
Sibila	+ -	Market gardening and marketing	6	7
Sanama-dougou	++	Market gardening and food processing	3	4
M'benwany	+ -	Market gardening and processing	2	3
Tenou	+	Market gardening	4	5
Weledikila	+	Market gardening	5	6
Total			26	30

[Source: Outcomes from SPSS made from field survey, 2020]

Key: ++: extreme, +: high + -: moderate -: low

The study found that in the villages of Markala, M'benwany, and Sibila, 70% of the respondents knew about the phenomenon of land grabbing. While less than ten per cent of the farmers in these communities stated that they had been affected by land grabbing, 60% of them knew family members or acquaintances whose land had been grabbed by large-scale operators, although they could not specify the exact number of hectares held by agricultural investors. In comparison, 25% of respondents in the Diodo, Tenou, Sanamadougou, and Weledikila villages argued that their plots had been grabbed, leading to their displacement. This was particularly true of the respondents in Sanamadougou.

In promoting agribusiness activities, smallholder farming lands are subject to intense competition, as most agricultural plots are targets of concessions and shady land transactions to the disadvantage of the local inhabitants. Respondents mentioned that villagers are generally not involved in the land allocation processes, since land acquisition is carried out without prior consultation and agreement. In most instances, the respondents in those areas were not compensated for the loss of their land. As one interviewee put it:

Most farmers have lost their agricultural lands because of M3 SA's large-scale farming in Sanamadougou. They have cultivated those plots for years as they inherited them from their grandparents, who established the village. Now they are told that those lands belong to the state. Most of them were neither informed nor compensated for the loss.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2020)

Likewise, some respondents in Markala, who have been less affected by land deals, indicated that they know people in neighbouring villages who have lost their lands to external actors. One such respondent stated:

Households are losing their land rights to wealthy domestic and foreign investors. These incidents are causing conflicts and anger between the investors and local communities resisting land deals.

(Interview at Markala in February 2022)

This constitutes a blatant violation of the LOA which stipulates in its Article 81, Section 2 that: “no individual or community can be forced to cede their land rights unless it is for public use and in exchange of a fair and prior compensation” (LOA, 2006: 18). The lands on which these rights are vested are part of public land (Code Domanial et Foncier, 2000). As already mentioned, the state may expropriate lands for public use. By law, the farmers are supposed to receive compensation. However, as the respondents above attest to, this is not the case.

## **Economic Impacts of Land Grabbing on Women**

The repercussions of these land grabs were severe, especially for women. As already highlighted in this article, Malian women make an invaluable contribution to food production in their households. Smallholder farming is the primary livelihood activity of the majority of the southern population, a fact that my survey confirmed. A household consisting of a male head, his spouses, several mature sons, and their spouses and children. There is a gendered and socially defined responsibility for household provisioning in this family: men are the main breadwinners, whereas females are expected to support male productive activities as their wives and daughters. Along with the belief that young women are provisional members of the family until they marry, the gendered productive



roles in the household legitimise the social, economic, and political power of men and boys in society. In terms of household provisioning, women's vital roles, including cooking meals and offering crucial non-staple food substances, such as cereals, legumes, vegetables, and proteins, for soups and sauces are downplayed. Culturally, men's provision of staples such as maize, millet, rice, and sorghum is considered more important. This gendered cultural valuation of men's and women's productive work has profound implications for women's access to productive resources; men lay claim to the more productive soils and leave the less productive ones to women. Women's poor land access has been further exacerbated by the land grabs in these communities. One respondent speaks to these issues in the following words:

As women, we have always experienced fragile land tenure systems. The market gardens we used to receive from our husband's connections are not accessible anymore since men are also losing their entitlements to farming plots with the rise of massive land dealing with large-scale investors. This is triggering frustration and conflicts over the remaining land within the families.

(Interview at Tenou village in February 2020)

Similar findings were reported in Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr's (2017) piece on Ghana. Their study found that women farmers' land access mechanisms and strategies were becoming progressively precarious due to land grabbing. Male farmers who lost their lands appropriated their plots previously handed over to their wives for cultivation. As Jackson (2007: 466) explains, "The rights inherited by males may be firmer and less subject to discretionary interpretation than the rights inherited by females." In effect, in Mali as in northern Ghana, the shifts in land dealings have made the household arena a place where new tensions regarding the control over plots are emerging.

These emerging changes in women's land access had profound implications for their household provisioning responsibilities. The FAO (2013) indicates that economic crisis and land grabbing are intrinsically linked and could potentially lead to hunger affecting one billion people, most of whom live in rural areas and are predominantly women and children. This study confirms these assertions. Women must rely on their food supplies to sustain themselves and their children when household granaries run out. Due to this gendered

obligation, females are forced to engage in autonomous farming through market gardening. Since women's market gardens are seized and turned into domestic or communal plots because of the cumulative land shortage, their earnings are jeopardised, and their children's food security needs are threatened. As one respondent explained:

We have nothing left. My whole life, I have never bought millet, and now I have to buy it, and my container is not well filled. Hence, land grabs lead to income deficiency and loss for us, affecting our lucrative access to basic food to feed ourselves and our families.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2022)

Another interviewee added:

Before the arrival of multinational investors in our communities, we were self-sufficient in providing the basic food needs of our families from our market gardens. Since the arrival of large investors, we have been unable to cultivate our land and meet our nutritional needs. As a result, families have been exposed to food insecurity due to the decline in production and lack of cultivable land.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2020)

Land grabbing has also affected women's ability to access foods cost-effectively, especially foods produced by agro-investors. Industrialised production led to a focus on the sale of agricultural products externally, that is in the city or outside the country. In line with this, an interviewee commented:

The products made by investor companies are generally meant for national, regional, or international markets and not for our local consumption. Even if these goods are made available to us in rural markets, most of us cannot afford them due to our lower income. The amount of food left for domestic and community consumption does not adequately cover families' necessities throughout the year.

(Focus group discussion at Weledikila village in February 2022)

This exacerbates food insecurity problems in the communities affected by land grabbing. With respect to food insecurity, two interviewees brought this stark reality into sharp focus by describing the impact of land grabs on their household consumption. One of them noted, "With the current socio-economic

situation, we are experiencing a constant decrease in the quantity and quality of meals” (interview at Tenou village in February 2022). The other put it even more succinctly as follows:

We cannot access land and the resources that we use to improve our household needs. This impacted our daily food consumption attitude. I can only provide two meals per day to my children. I hope the situation changes soon.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2020)

Market gardens were not only a source of non-staple food sources for households but also a source of income. With the loss of access to plots for market gardens from which women could derive their incomes, women are selling or mortgaging their valuable tools, including agricultural production equipment, jewellery, clothes, and anything else that could be sold or traded, to survive. As one respondent explained:

I sold all my valuables, gold, silver, and livestock to feed my family. Due to the persisting socio-economic challenges, my husband migrated to the mine site as we lost our family land. I am now left with six children to take care of. I have no other options than working as a wage labourer for a meagre salary in large companies.

(Interview at Weledikila village in February 2020)

A second option many women are choosing is to work as farm labourers on investors’ farms or migrate to urban areas for low-wage jobs. A respondent opined:

The socio-political insecurity and land grabbing from belligerent groups are creating hunger in many communities, including ours. As a result, many young people migrate to city centres or neighbouring countries, searching for a better life.

(Focus group discussion at Weledikila village in February 2022)

Participants conveyed that their economic circumstances were worse as a result. In urban areas, day workers make around CFA1 500 a day (less than USD 4), a salary that is unusually low compared to daily expenditures for housing and nutrition.

## Social Impacts of Land Grabbing on Women

In addition to the economic impacts, land grabbing also affects women farmers' social relationships. These social impacts revolve around the psychosocial disequilibrium due to increased poverty, insecurity, and the disruption of family units as individual members migrate in search of work, as well as the decrease in family income and changes in the household diet. All of these stressors led to disputes, disagreements, and conflicts between couples, resulting in divorces and domestic violence toward women. An interviewee noted:

Land losses in our communities led to divorces and gender-based violence toward women. The husbands losing their masculine power over resources triggered frustration and a decrease in confidence as they cannot provide for their household needs. Two of my nieces got divorced because of such incidents. There are several cases of physical violence daily against many women.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2020)

Another woman added:

Since we lost the communal land, my husband has become more aggressive and violent. We have seven kids to feed as well as myself and his parents. With income losses, he became eccentric. He does not want to hear anything about household expenses. We are constantly fighting over the remaining resources.

(Interview at Sanamadougou village in February 2020)

Yet another social impact of land acquisitions in Mali has been the security challenges it has created in recent years. The ongoing civil war in the north of the country and the rise of jihadist groups in the centre of the country are partly due to increasing pressure on land and the scarcity of resources and pasture (Bertrand *et al.*, 2017). The communities in the north and central part of the country, including Ségou, feel that they have been partly neglected politically and economically by the central government, compared to the rebels in the north and the sedentary farmers in the south of the country. For example, the Ségou region, home to some two million people and growing at a rate of more than three per cent a year, supports a range of agricultural activities including pastoral nomadism, irrigated rice, and sugar crops, dry millet, maize, sesame, and

cotton, as well as fishing. However, as land has become increasingly scarce and therefore more valuable, relations between the different groups of people who once lived together amicably are now experiencing growing tension and conflict. Women bear the brunt of this insecurity. As an illustration, one-third of the Malian population, of which 70% are women, is now in an urgent humanitarian crisis, mainly poverty and hunger crisis (World Bank, 2022). Accordingly, a respondent in Tenou stated:

The difficulties resulting from the multidimensional crisis in Mali affect women more than men as it exposes them to further violence and insecurity in conducting their economic activities. For example, in municipalities under terrorist threats, including ours, residents face hurdles growing their farms, selling in village markets, or engaging in farmers' organisations that remain controlled by terrorists.

(Interview at Tenou village in February 2022)

Women and girls may be subject to higher levels of gender-based violence during conflicts, such as arbitrary killings, torture, and sexual violence. As Mukengere Mukwege and Nangini (2009) have noted for South Kivu, which is infamously known as the rape capital of the world, sexual violence against women and girls is increasingly a tactic that the perpetrators of war and conflict use. As one of the interviewees explained:

Since the rise of this crisis, we are living in fear. Our neighbour village was attacked last month. There were reports of insurgents forcing women to wear burka or hijab before attending local markets or public places. When women can travel, they are victims of robbery and sexual assaults by insurgent groups. These women are forced to remain within their communities and sell in the weekly markets while abiding by the dominant rule. Several women were also abandoned by their husbands due to the conflict or killed by armed groups.

(Focus group discussion at Weledikila village in February 2022)

The psychological trauma and stress associated with living in fear and uncertainty due to insecurity in their communities are compounded by the difficulties of poor land access as a result of land grabs. The responsibility for feeding families lies heavily on women in the majority of African communities. Increasingly, studies found that women in the region could no longer rely on agriculture to

feed their families (Hall, 2011; Li, 2011; McMichael, 2012). In Diodo, Tenou, Sanamadougou, and Weledikila, for example, 63% of respondents reported food insecurity. They argued that the annual food production is insufficient to meet the needs of their households. Meanwhile, women are least likely to get a stable and well-paid job in the industrial sector because they often do not meet the educational requirements of the companies, given their generally low levels of education. According to the findings of the 2018 Mali Demographic and Health Survey (INSTAT and ICF 2019:2), while 28% of Malian women are literate, the literacy rate for men stands at more than one and a half times higher (47%). The figures for tertiary education rates are even more dismal; only two per cent of women aged 15 and above have tertiary education. The equivalent figure for men is three times as high.

In the Ségou region, the prospects for the next generation of children are even bleaker. The majority (90%) of the women respondents stated that their children do not go to school. Many of the schools and literacy centres in the villages in the municipality of Ségou have been closed down due to the ongoing crisis. Parents remain pessimistic about the possibility of their children, especially their daughters, getting formal education given the multidimensional challenges that they currently face.

## **Conclusion**

Land grabbing has become a major issue in Mali, leading to numerous conflicts since the early 2000s. These conflicts are primarily driven by the uneasy coexistence of an informal customary system with formal statutory law. According to the statutory tenure laws, all land belongs to the State. Mali's government, which guarantees statutory rights, is the ultimate owner of all lands. In its policy of promoting agribusiness and investment, the government has ceded thousands of hectares of land to national and international companies. Yet in practice, customary chiefs used to manage lands in most farming communities and provided user rights to women, albeit in a discriminatory fashion.

In the last two decades, however, the role of chiefs in managing lands has been eroded considerably as the State has asserted its rights to the land per formal statutory law. In pursuance of the colonial policy on land, the Malian

State has favoured private investors over citizens in its distribution of land. As demonstrated above, the result is tension at the household level that leads to women's loss of their user rights to land given that women's asset rights are restricted more severely than those of men.

These changes have had socio-economic impacts on women in several ways. Their household provisioning responsibility has been made more difficult as the asset traditionally used to carry out this activity is no longer available to them. This has led to increased food insecurity. While other studies in both Mali (Traore, 2013) and other countries on the continent (Tsikata, 2016; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017) have demonstrated the negative economic impacts of land grabs as done in this analysis, this study goes a step further in exploring the social impacts of the land grabs including new tensions at both the household and community levels. The Malian case demonstrates the multiple impacts of landgrabs on women and shows how the modern State, and not just traditional institutions (Yaro, 2013), are complicit in the immiseration of women in contemporary Africa.

Opening national agrarian lands to foreign investors may yield economic profits but negatively impact women's socio-economic activities. Smallholder farmers' land entitlements, especially women's, should be guaranteed even as the State seeks to enhance its foreign exchange earnings. Women's rights to land lots and other natural resources have traditionally been tenuous, and the State should be seeking to strengthen those rights rather than undermining them even further as evident in the Malian case.

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