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# Landless women, hopeless women?

Gender, land and  
decentralisation in Niger

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making  
decentralisation  
work





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# Acknowledgements

We would like to dedicate this study to 92-year old Tambara Hawa, who sang us the songs composed for her *tambarci* ceremony some seventy years ago. Surrounded by her daughters and granddaughters, she still roared with laughter at one that cruelly taunted her co-wife, the jealous and wasteful *kishya* she cut down to size with a song all those years ago! Her keen eye and sharp memory brought alive nearly three-quarters of a century of rural life in the south of the region of Maradi, and this study gained immeasurably from the insights this remarkable woman shared with us.

Our thanks also go to two other women who agreed to make their portraits with us: 35-year old Délou W, the hardworking young grandmother, farmer and municipal councillor, another *tambara*, who is buying fields for her daughter; and 28-year old Djorki, a young Wodaabe Fulani nomad who lost her animals and is now making desperate and valiant attempts to cultivate her fields on the edge of the desert north of Tanout.

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**Translated from French by Lou Leask**

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## List of abbreviations

COFO	Land commission
COFOB	Community-based land commission
COFOCOM	Municipal land commission
COFODEP	Departmental land commission
IGA	Income-generating activities
ONAHA	National Office for Hydro-agricultural Developments
PADL	Preparatory decentralisation project
SPCR	Permanent secretariat of the Rural Code

# Glossary

*Bugagé*: Tuareg, most of whom are descended from slaves (singular: *buzu*).

*Gamana*: Portion of land allocated by the *mai gida* to dependent family members, including women and young men.

*Gandu*: Family holding. This is the basis of the traditional agricultural production system, and is farmed by members of the various households within the extended family, under the auspices of the *mai gandu*. Production is managed by the *mai gida*.

*Gida*: The homestead shared by households descended from the same grandfather and great-grandfather. Domestic unit of consumption.

*Gona*: Field.

*Huluwa*: A woman who is not a *tambara* (plural: *hulayé*).

*Hutun gandu*: *hutu* means rest, or peace and quiet. The expression *hutun gandu* has the same meaning as *kublin gona* (see below).

*Kishyia*: Co-wife, or women who share the same husband in a polygamous arrangement. Translated literally, *kishya* means jealousy.

*Kubli*: The sequestration of women following a husband's decision to reduce the mobility of his wife or wives – whose consent is required, but not always willingly given. Sequestered women may not leave their home in daylight and are only allowed out in the evening with their husband's permission, usually accompanied by someone else. In return, the husband has to provide for all her needs.

*Kublin gona*: The sequestration of women that prevents them from working in the fields. Born out of a lack of agricultural land, this practice effectively removes the female workforce from the *gandu*, and in its second stage, from all agricultural work – meaning that the women lose their *gamana*.

*Mai gandu*: The head of the holding, who works under the supervision of the *mai gida*. The roles of the *mai gida* and *mai gandu* have merged with the increasing fragmentation of family holdings, which now tend to be organised around a single household.

*Mai gida*: The family patriarch, who traditionally held gerontocratic sway over every household in the extended family. The division of the *gandu* into several small, autonomous units of domestic production and consumption means that his powers are now mainly restricted to his own household.

*Miji*: Husband.

*Mijin hadja*: The husband of a *hadja* – a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. This expression has a 'negative' connotation, implying that the husband is dominated by his wife if she made the pilgrimage and became *hadja* before he had been to Mecca and acquired the status of *el hadj*.

*Mijin kunjia*: A man whose wife heads one of the management committees put in place in the context of development activities.

*Mijin tambara*: The husband of a *tambara*.

*Noma*: Agricultural work or weeding.

*Sarkin noma*: "Master farmer" – this title is reserved for a select social group: those that have managed to harvest 1,000 sheaves (or 5 measures of 2.5 kilos per sheaf – maths??) in one year. The practice of bestowing this prestigious title during a special ceremony is dying out.

*Tallia*: Spaghetti made of wheat flour – the name is derived from the manual Italian pasta-making machine.

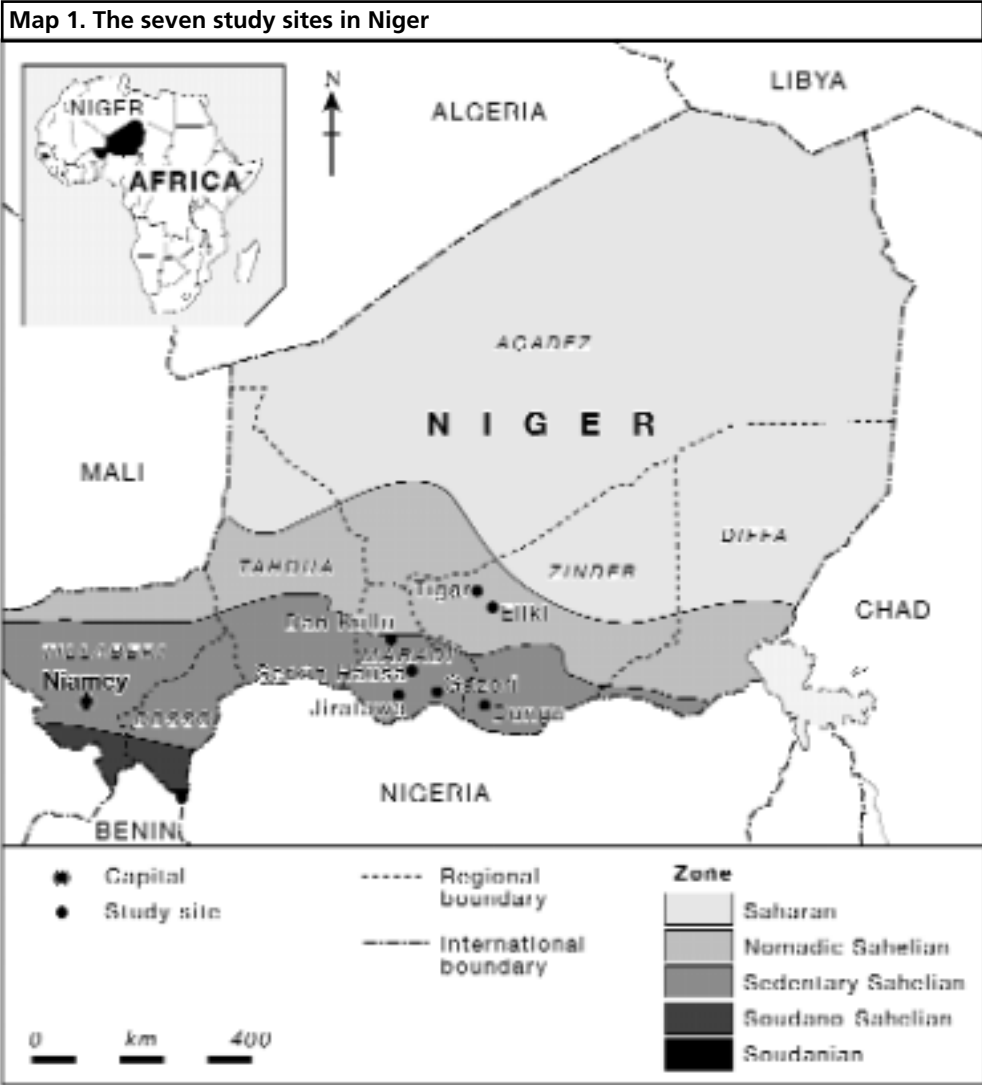
*Tambara*: (plural: *tambaraye*). Women whose economic success has won them social recognition and renown. A woman becomes *tambara* during a big celebration in which she redistributes her possessions and gives her husband extravagant gifts (traditionally a horse with saddle and bridle, fine clothing, etc.; nowadays money). This practice is dying out.

*Tambarci* or *kan korya*: The celebration held to mark a woman becoming a *tambara*.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Study context

This study is a synthesis of research undertaken in Niger in the context of the second phase of IIED’s “Making Decentralisation Work” programme, which covers four Sahelian countries in West Africa: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal. One of the aims of the programme was to identify how women’s capacity to become more involved in decision-making at the local level can be strengthened, particularly in terms of access to





natural resources. Another aim was to identify the structures through which women secure their systems of production.

This paper presents the synthesis of a case study on the sub-regional theme “Gender, land and decentralisation”. The main study consists of two interrelated parts: three portraits of women illustrating three different situations in terms of access to natural resources and local leadership, and a general report based on these portraits and on interviews conducted in the seven study sites in Maradi and Zinder regions.

## 1.2 The issues and hypotheses

The key issue in this study was to determine how women in rural areas of Niger deal with pressure on land within changing agricultural production systems and a context of emergent decentralisation. Another concern was how they position themselves with regard to their land rights – and what strategies they use to capitalise on these rights.

The study is based on four main assumptions:

**Hypothesis 1:** Pressure on land in southern Niger in particular is changing social modes of access to land and leading to the exclusion of women from agricultural production (the ‘de-feminisation’ of agriculture<sup>1</sup>). In order to deal with this situation, women are developing compensatory strategies that could undermine the social rationales behind traditional modes of land transfer.

**Hypothesis 2:** At the institutional level, the decentralised system of land commissions (and especially the forthcoming introduction of municipal land commissions) could bring greater equity for rural women in the municipality. At the moment, however, people still prefer to use the diverse local structures that determine and negotiate access to natural resources.

**Hypothesis 3:** The system of agricultural production has always had an internal mechanism for social recognition through merit, aspired to by both women and men in rural communities. There is a correlation between the decline of this mechanism and the changes in the system of agricultural production, which have led to the ongoing emergence of new benchmarks for competition among women.

**Hypothesis 4:** In the absence of profitable non-agricultural options for women, poverty is becoming feminised. However, different women have different concerns regarding access to land and pursue a range of economic activities in order to secure a living, which vary according to their age, status and ethnic group.

*"When we touch on gender relations with regard to land, we are dealing with the family, with religion and with society. After kinship relations through the father or mother, there is no doubt that the relationships men establish over land are the strongest factor in how a family, a society and a nation are structured."*  
Jacques Faye

1. See IIED Working Paper No. 128, *Women's access to land: the de-feminisation of agriculture in southern Niger?* M. Diarra-Doka and M. Monimart, March 2004.

In a context of very rapid demographic growth (3.3% per annum) and widespread pressure on threatened resources, rural women's access to land and natural resources is becoming an increasingly pressing issue for the land tenure systems currently in force in Niger. We share the view expressed by Jacques Faye (see Box opposite),<sup>2</sup> and are not alone in our belief that since land tenure includes the power relations between men and women, investigating gender relations in this arena could throw new light on the changes currently under way in the region.

### 1.3 Methodology

This study was conducted as a piece of action-research aimed at generating knowledge about a problem that is still largely unexplored. The 'personal' approach to the field-work in several different territories encouraged individual actors and actresses to express their views so that we could record their perceptions and analysis of the situation. The women's portraits functioned as a tool that allowed us to get people to talk on the theme of the study and record what they said, focusing on situations that showed the diverse means by which women gain access to land. To ensure that we covered a representative sample of the main scenarios, seven study sites were retained on the basis of the six criteria listed below:

1. The existence or absence of secondary data (reference or control sites)
2. The agro-ecological zone
3. Demographic pressure
4. The practice of growing irrigated crops and their mode of management (state or traditional)
5. The dominant mode of production (agricultural, agro-pastoral, pastoral)
6. The practice of *tambarci* (current, declining, defunct or exogenous).

In the Maradi region, Jiratawa, Sherkin Hausa and Dan Kullu had already been the subject of two research studies undertaken in 1975/1980 and 2000/2001 (C. Raynaut *et al*, 1988). As there were documented data on a wide range of themes that provided a reliable basis for comparison with the current situation, we used Jiratawa, Sherkin Hausa and Dan Kullu as reference sites to assess change in our study.

*Tambarci* (or *Kan korya*) is a practice whereby the title *tambara* is conferred on a woman during the *Kan korya* ceremony in a public acknowledgement of her impressive agricultural output. Since the practice is falling into disuse, taking this criterion into account meant that we had to determine what stage in its evolution it had reached in order to make a correlation between the evolution of *kan korya* and pressure on land. The existence or continuation of this practice reveals a good deal about the various factors that affect the position of women in rural communities.

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2. Extract from a presentation by the Senegalese sociologist Jacques Faye on the theme "Women and Land" at the International Women's Day held in Dakar on 8 March 2004.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study sites	
Study sites	Characterisation according to the chosen criteria
<b>Jiratawa (reference site)</b>	Agricultural area in southern Maradi, with state-managed irrigated fields; predominantly agricultural production High pressure on land (150 p/km <sup>2</sup> ): in many cases inherited land holdings are too small to be shared between beneficiaries <i>Tambarci</i> practiced in the past
<b>Sherkin Hausa (reference site)</b>	Agro-pastoral area in eastern Maradi; predominantly agricultural production High pressure on land (83 p/km <sup>2</sup> ): in many cases inherited land holdings are too small to be shared between beneficiaries Practice of <i>tambarci</i> dying out
<b>Dan Kullu (reference site)</b>	Agro-pastoral area in northern Maradi; predominantly agricultural production Moderate pressure on land (42 p/km <sup>2</sup> ): no vacant lands <i>Tambarci</i> is currently practiced
<b>Gazori (control site)</b>	Agricultural area in southern Maradi; predominantly agricultural production High pressure on land (98 p/km <sup>2</sup> ): still possible to share inherited lands Practice of <i>tambarci</i> dying out
<b>Dungu (control site)</b>	Agricultural area in southern Zinder, with a traditionally managed irrigated basin and predominantly agricultural production High pressure on land (137 p/km <sup>2</sup> ): in many cases inherited land holdings are too small to be shared between beneficiaries <i>Tambarci</i> is an exogenous practice
<b>Eliki (control site)</b>	Agro-pastoral area on the edge of the pastoral area in northern Zinder; predominantly pastoral production Little pressure but no vacant lands (28 p/km <sup>2</sup> ) <i>Tambarci</i> is an exogenous practice
<b>Tigar (control site)</b>	Pastoral area in northern Zinder; predominantly pastoral production Little pressure with vacant lands (2 p/km <sup>2</sup> ) <i>Tambarci</i> is an exogenous practice

## 2. Changing systems of agricultural production

### 2.1 The traditional system of agricultural production

The economic geography of Niger has been shaped by its traditional agricultural and pastoral production systems, which have complementary but divergent relationships with land. As a result, the country is divided into two distinct areas: an agricultural zone and a pastoral zone. Both activities are permitted within these zones, with greater prerogatives given to one or other production system according to the zone.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, land was developed as families cleared it and created water points under the direction of the head of the clan or family. Land had to be left fallow, so more distant fields were cultivated and farming hamlets established, which in turn led to the development of new villages that recognised the authority of the original head of family or clan. This system of agricultural production continued for a long time thanks to the availability of vacant lands (bush).

Under this system, collective farm units known as *gandu* are controlled by the *maï gandu*, who organises the agricultural work. The *gandu* is a collective asset, which is overseen by the *maï gida* (patriarch), who manages production so that everyone's needs are met. The *gida* has become a unit of housing, production and consumption. Individual fields (*gamana*) are also cultivated, according to a timetable that allows people to spend two or three days a week in their own fields.

The *gandu* (farm unit) is controlled by members of the *gida*, which is the basic social unit in Hausa communities: an enclosure where one or more married men live with their households. In the latter case it will be home to an extended family headed by the *maï gida*, who is usually the oldest man in the unit. The extended family was the ideal and dominant model of family groupings until the 1980s (Marthe Diarra Doka, 2000),<sup>4</sup> although this could fragment into smaller family groups following the death of the *maï gida* or if a family member challenged his authority. A. Luxereau and B. Roussel (1997) explain, "Appropriating land was not a priority objective while land was plentiful. The area cultivated by each *gida* might vary according to the size of the *gida*, the health of its members, their plans (aspiring to

#### Gandu and gamanas

*"The maï gida makes individual plots available for married women and young men. Boys are allocated a plot when they reach the age of 15 if there is land available (vacant lands, fallow).*

*Girls, however, must work on their mother's fields. This is the first level at which women are marginalized in terms of access to land. This kind of exclusion has never been linked to the availability of land, and could be seen as the socialisation of girls to land insecurity: at best, they may borrow land from their husband when they are married.*

Doka and Monimart, 2003

3. Law No. 61-5 of the 26th May sets a northern limit to farmlands, forbidding farming beyond the 350mm isohyet, which is seen as a pastoral zone, but allowing herders to grow subsistence crops.

4. The reference point for this was the drought in 1984.

become a *sarkin noma*, or “master farmer”, forthcoming marriages, youngest member becoming independent, etc.) and their obligations (after colonisation, clearing fields whose produce is sold to pay taxes)”.

The *gandu* may be divided up for other reasons, apart from the family fragmenting. Nicolas (1968) noted that in Jiratawa “*the individual enjoys considerable independence within this highly differentiated society. Everyone has personal assets and their own fields or gamana, and can use the income from these for their own ends. The size of the individual fields tends to increase constantly, to the detriment of the gida’s collective fields (gandu), which are cultivated communally ...*” Sutter (1982) reported that the extended family also tended to fragment into smaller family groups when non-farm income increased significantly, if the *mai gida* could not meet the financial needs of the family, or if the *mai gida* only had a small holding. The immediate consequence of this transformation was that responsibility for all the functions previously assigned to the *mai gida* or *mai gandu* fell on the head of household.

Within the traditional system of agricultural production, the social redistribution of agricultural surplus based on merit and/or the social recognition of women and men were the norm. The *kan korya* or *tambarci* ceremony conferred the title *tambara* on women; those who are not *tamabara* are known as *huluwa* – someone of no account who has no voice in the public arena. For men, the title *sarkin noma* raises an individual to the rank of “master farmer”, a seasoned farmer who has proved his worth by producing a thousand sheaves of millet in the year he is accorded this title.

## 2.2 Longstanding and established transitions

### From colonisation to the saturation of farmland

The colonisation of land for agriculture began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to demographic growth and escalating financial needs and obligations, accelerating rapidly from the 1950s onwards until village lands became completely saturated. In 1975, C. Raynaut spoke of “an overloaded agrarian system” where the most favourable areas for farming were reaching population densities of 35 to 100 persons per km<sup>2</sup>. One of the consequences of this was the loss of pastures, which have disappeared from the village territories in the reference sites for this study. The only remaining pastures are the livestock corridors, and these have been encroached upon by fields used to produce annual or permanent crops. The former co-existence or integration of agricultural and pastoral systems is no longer practicable, and this has led to a growing number of increasingly entrenched conflicts.

The practice of leaving land fallow was essential to the balance of the traditional systems, but is now declining or has disappeared entirely, lingering on in only two of the control sites: Elik and Tigar. In the latter, it has become a strategy for agricultural colonisation and the appropriation of vast areas by neighbouring farming communities. This is a latent source of conflict with herders, who believe that it constitutes a real threat to their pastoral livelihoods.

The absence of fallow is a decisive indicator of land saturation at the household and village levels, and raises the fundamental question of how soil fertility can be renewed. Two common responses to this are to apply organic manure or wait for the most useful species of trees and shrubs to regenerate naturally (*Faidherbia albida*, *Adansonia digitata*, etc.). As fallow and bush lands have disappeared, the value of trees has increased, often as a function of the income they generate: a *Faidherbia albida* (ana tree) sells for between 3,000 and 5,000 francs CFA, and an *Adansonia digitata* (baobab) for 15,000 to 50,000 francs CFA, while a bag of baobab leaves will fetch 1,000 francs CFA.

The enhanced value of trees also extends to their sub-products. Women who have a *gamana* retain rights over what its trees produce, and there is still open access to their fruit but not to produce with high added value like baobab leaves. Trees now have as much economic potential as the fields in which they grow and are dealt with separately from them: they may be loaned, rented or pledged; cut by the owner; sold separately to the person who acquires the field or to a third party. The growing power of landowners over the natural resources in their field means that the poorest groups, and women in particular, are doubly excluded – from both the land and its resources – and are thus even more vulnerable.

While the value of trees has increased, fields are thought to be less and less productive. Farmers in Dan Kulu told us “You could get around 100 sheaves from a one-hectare field ten years ago, but now you’ll only get 40 sheaves if you’ve got a cart to transport manure, and you certainly won’t get more than 25 if you put nothing on the field”. This drop in yields has led people to pledge or sell their fields to raise enough money to migrate, in the hope that this will prove more profitable than farming.



Photo: Marie Monimart

Grain storage in Dan Kulu

## Fragmentation of family farms

The process of farm fragmentation has brought about a progressive but fundamental change in the traditional management of *gandus*: the individualisation of land ownership. When the *maï gida* dies, the *gandu* ceases to be a collective, undivided holding and becomes the sole property of the *maï gida* or *maï gandu*. This first phase of individual appropriation marginalizes women, although they do retain their use rights to the *gamana*. When these use rights were guaranteed, young dependent males and women never needed to have their own personal land, but the situation has changed as the individualisation of inheritance and increasing demographic pressure has dramatically reduced the size of plots and holdings. In 2001, M. Issaka recorded average field sizes of 0.73 ha in Jiratawa, 2.5 ha to over 10 ha in Sherkin Hausa, and 4 ha to 20 ha in Dan Kullu.

The individualisation of inheritance brought a second fundamental change in access to land, which acquired a market value and was pledged, rented, sold and bought. Registered land transactions show that the constant rise in the price of fields means that people now have to pay up to or even over \$200-\$300 per hectare, which is more than the average individual's GDP (estimated at US\$ 184 in 2004).

The most obvious consequence of this double change in access to land is greater and accelerated social differentiation between "the rich" and "the poor", between "rights holders" and "the disenfranchised". Women's exclusion is an ongoing process that is at various stages in the study sites: in Jiratawa there are now two generations of women who no longer farm; and while women in Dungu still have *gamana*, it is their husbands who cultivate them. One possible option for women is recourse to Islamic law, which seems to tend towards a more "customary" approach, preserving a minimum amount of land for women through inheritance. They can also gain access to land by renting or purchasing plots, although only a minority of relatively affluent women can afford to rent or buy fields.

These changes have many other socio-economic consequences for women and households:

- Sharing the risks of production between all members of the household is a strategy for dealing with insecurity, but it reduces women and young men's opportunities to use what they produce for their own personal ends;
- Changes in the land tenure system have led to a reorganisation of farm work, which is now more individualised and involves less manual labour: this primarily excludes women and, to a lesser extent, young men;
- The development of the agricultural proletariat goes hand in hand with the concentration of land capital among the least vulnerable households, but it does not create sufficient demand for labour. Young men engaged in farming often have no land and cannot be sure of finding work locally. In this context, women are starting to work as farm labourers too, but at a daily rate of 500 francs CFA rather than the 750 francs CFA paid to men;

- Those who opt to migrate as a survival strategy are having to go further afield for longer periods, forced to cover the rising departure costs by pledging or selling their fields. And it is not only young men who are migrating: older individuals are having to turn to short-term migration in order to meet their household's immediate basic needs. For some young men, and even entire families, permanent migration seems to be the only answer. In Dungu, young women are also beginning to go to Mecca, where they work clandestinely for several years. On their return, many of these young *hadja* find that they have little or no access to fields because there is no available land.

## 2.3 Decentralisation and local forms of land management: a new framework

Through a process of administrative and territorial decentralisation and the implementation of its Rural Code, Niger is attempting to address a range of problems caused by the fact that it does not have one single Land Law. This results in land issues being dealt with on a case-by-case basis according to individual interests and arrangements selected from customary law, Islamic law and national legislation. Land disputes between households and communities tend to drag on as the protagonists invariably resort to different sources of law. *“Order No. 93-015 of the 2nd March 1993, setting out the principles of the Rural Code, is an expression of political will, and is primarily supposed to be a special instrument for development. Called upon to progressively take the place of all pre-existing legal rules, whether these are based on written law or custom, the Code should allow unified management of all the components of rural areas and natural resources: grazing, land, forests, wild and domestic animals, water resources, etc. Particular emphasis is placed on the right to own land, which extends to the most marginalized strata of society”* (J. Habas et al., 2003)

In parallel with this, Niger has embarked upon a process of territorial administrative decentralisation, setting up eight regions, 36 departments and 265 municipalities. The decentralisation process was further established with local elections in July 2004 and the effective installation of municipal councils at the beginning of 2005. Although the process is by no means new, it has only recently begun to take effect.

### Box 1. Aims of the Rural Code

To secure rural livelihoods (human development)  
and promote the sustainable use of natural resources (environmental protection)  
in the global context of interventions (development of village territories)

#### In order to fulfil this mission

the Rural Code is putting in place structures (COFOs and SPs)  
to clarify local procedures governing access to and use of natural resources  
(rules and clusters of rights),  
in the context of national legal mechanisms  
based on a global vision of rural land use (SAF).

In order to reinforce the dynamic of a State subject to the rule of law, transactions related to rural activities will be registered (in the rural land register)

Source: Chabbert and Younfa, 2004.



## **Box 2. The mandate and composition of municipal land commissions (COFOCOMs)**

Land commissions are chaired by the mayor; other members include a Permanent Secretary of the commission, heads of the technical services, heads of canton and groupings, and representatives of farmers (1), herders (2, one of whom should be a transhumant herder), women (2), young men from rural areas (1) and forest users (1).

Among other things, COFOCOMs are responsible for keeping the rural land register, issuing land titles (in conjunction with the department), controlling productive land use, securing common pool resources and issuing certificates relating to priority use rights over village territories.

Source : Adapted from draft Order No.\_MDA CNCR SP regarding the organisation, attributions and functional modalities of land commissions in municipalities, villages or tribes. Republic of Niger, 2005.

The permanent secretariat of the Rural Code (the SPCR) set up land commissions (COFOs) within each department (formerly *arrondissements*). The Prefect chairs the departmental land commission (COFODEP), with a member of a deconcentrated state services acting as permanent secretary (often from the department of Agriculture). COFODEP is made up of departmental-level representatives of the government, the customary authorities (chiefs of canton or other groupings) and civil society (farmers, herders, women and young men). At the village or group level, around a thousand community-based land commissions (COFOBs) have developed in parallel with the departmental-level land commissions.

Municipal land commissions (COFOCOMs) intervene at the intermediate level of municipalities. Although their mandate and composition were set out during a national workshop held at the end of 2005 (see Box), there were still no official COFOCOMs operating in Niger at the time this paper was written in mid-2006.

However, in the context of preparatory projects for decentralisation (PADL), precursors to the COFOCOMs included a land commission in Mayahi in the Maradi region that covers two of our study sites (Sherkin Hausa and Dan Kulu). The COFOCOM in Sherkin Hausa is our only reference in the study sites because it kept good rural land registers from 2000 onwards.

Women are systematically represented at every level of land commission structures, since it was established that COFOCOMs, which are chaired by the mayor, should include 3 municipal councillors, one of whom should be female, plus two representatives from women's groups. Therefore, it is to be hoped that the minimum quota of 10% of women set for all elections in Niger will be met – although the quality of this participation is still an issue, particularly at decision-making levels.

The main merit of this new approach to land management is the democratic openness it allows. It is no longer just the customary authorities that regulate land matters, as representatives of the government and civil society – which includes women – are being called upon to participate in the process as well.

The guiding principles behind the Rural Code encourage reform through a positive, pragmatic procedure, reaffirming the need to take account of customary rules in order to justify land ownership and resolve conflicts. The question is whether these municipalities, which were designed to cover areas regulated by traditional chiefdoms (cantons), will have the knowledge or ability to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, and what relationships they will establish with the other institutions entitled to intervene with regard to land and natural resources.

*"Although Laws N° 2002-012 and 2002-013 of 11th June 2002 establish the principle of local government property and the transfer of public and state lands from the State to the municipality, this transfer is still a possibility rather than an obligation. In terms of land organisation, the municipality is only responsible for preserving and protecting the environment (while the customary chiefs have real land management attributions). In other words, the anticipated transfers to municipalities are neither very precise nor very generous. Under current legislation as it stands, municipalities seems to be conspicuously absent from land organisation and highly dependent on the State in just about every respect".*

J Habas et al., 2003

The fact that the land commissions do not differentiate between urban and rural lands does not bode well for the smooth or effective implementation of the Rural Code, and may run counter to the drive for democracy noted above. In theory, the responsibilities of the COFOs are entirely consistent with greater democracy, as they deal with land use and the attribution of rural holdings and rights of ownership, and also have the power to sanction offences and enforce land use regulations.

The texts relating to land tenure and decentralisation need to be harmonised and brought into line with each other to assist the introduction of rural registers – written records of the rights of ownership and use held over common lands.

The implementation of decentralisation and the Rural Code is creating a new framework for land management that should pull together previous and ongoing evolutions and generate new balances. At the moment the process is too recent and patchy to draw any conclusions about what the future holds. However, experiences in several situations reveal various trends that suggest certain hypotheses, particularly with regard to the evolution of different systems of rights.



### 3. Changing modes of access to land and natural resources

#### 3.1 Observations on hypothesis 1

**Hypothesis 1:** The pressure on land observed in southern Niger in particular is changing social modes of access to land and leading to the exclusion of women from agricultural production (the 'de-feminisation' of agriculture). In order to deal with this situation women are developing compensatory strategies that could undermine the social rationales behind traditional modes of land transfer.

#### Limitations of the traditional system for transferring land

We have seen that individual land ownership did not figure in the traditional system of land management because the land holding unit was seen as indivisible. Plots were equitably and systematically allocated to younger family members and women through loans, and the practice of granting a plot to young married women ultimately became the norm, and thus an obligation.

The practice of sharing out farmland following the death of the head of the family began in the 1970s as a response to the growing number of households within the extended family, the impossibility of colonising new land, falling yields and the growing monetarisation of transactions. After the death of a *maï gandu* in Dan Kullu, we observed that land on large farms was always allocated according to matrilinear groups, in order to maintain the traditional use of the *gandu* while ensuring a degree of cohesion between members of the new derived *gandus*. However, land on small farms was shared out between rights holders, which meant that women were excluded. Here the traditional management system is responsible for an initial flaw in allowing land to be shared out between individual offspring through inheritance. A further flaw in the system was women's exclusion from inheriting land due to the principle of virilocal residence, whereby married women no longer stay with their original family group, but go and live with their husband's group.

Other forms of land distribution in Dan Kullu include donation, when the head of the farm gives fields to his children during his lifetime. When the *maï gandu* dies, the remaining land should be shared out between male children who have not been given any, including children that have been conceived but not yet born. The *maï gandu's* wives retain their *gamana* as part of their inheritance. His daughters, who have already left to go and live with their husbands, or who are expected to do so, must exercise their use rights in their new family through access to the *gamana*, which they may then appropriate (inherit) when their husband dies.

*"We claimed our part of the land heritage even though it was shared out a long time ago. Are the children of our grandmother's other brothers more her grandchildren than we are? Why should we be left out? The land was distributed again, and our mother got her share this time."*

Man from Sherkin Hausa

In areas where the pressure on land is greatest, such as Sherkin Hausa or Gazori, a growing number of **women have succeeded in claiming their part of the inheritance**. By contesting the way that land was distributed some thirty years before, women, or rather their children, have been able to obtain their share of the holding. Family disputes over land have reached such a pitch that there is a growing trend now to share land out according to Islamic law, which gives a half-share to girls. Pre-COFOCOM registrations in Sherkin Hausa (see Table 2 below) show that 7.14% of women have inherited fields and 4.25% have been given land.

This practice is systematic in the south of the country (Jiratawa and Dungu), where there is so little land to be shared out between the heirs that it is usually sold and the proceeds divided between rights holders according to Koranic law. As a result, we are now seeing a generation of young people who have little or no land. It is worth noting that although the land commission in Dungu registered a large number of inherited fields, none of them belong to women, who are traditionally excluded from cultivating garden plots.

While customary law certainly prevents women from owning land and denies them the freedom to transfer it to their heirs (male or female), it is relatively equitable insofar as it guarantees women access to the resource according to their needs and their capacity to put it to productive use. This still applies in northern Niger (Eliki, Tigar, Dan Kullu), where there is less pressure on land. However, the practice is already showing its limitations. In pastoral communities in Eliki and Tigar farming is seen as a sign of failure, and in Tigar only female heads of family or women from vulnerable households cultivate along with their husbands. Women from less vulnerable households keep to the dominant, pastoral mode of production and avoid getting involved in any agricultural activities.

**Extract from the portrait of Djorki (Eliki)**

Djorki, a young Bororo Fulani woman, started out cultivating borrowed fields in Tanout and now farms her own fields here in Eliki. She calls them her "own" fields because her husband gave her this one, so she sees it as hers. But she does it for the children too, and may have to find fields elsewhere if she and her husband don't stay together in the future. It's not long since the fields were cleared and agricultural activities began, but it seems that the dominant gandu gamana model has been adopted here. However, the rules of the game are still unclear for these increasingly sedentary groups of nomadic herders.

Women in Dan Kullu use what they grow to cover their own needs, and also for household consumption if food is in short supply – as is often the case now after successive poor harvests. Further south, in Gazori and Sherkin Hausa, women still have access to *gamana* and grow millet, sorghum, cowpea and sorrel in association with each other. Some *gamana* cover about a hectare of land. The trees growing in the *gamana* belong to their husbands, but women can use their produce (trimmings, pods, fruit). Young married women in Sherkin Hausa no longer have access to *gamana* now because the *gandus* have become too small.



Dungu and Sherkin Hausa are witnessing **the emergence of the first generation of women not to work on the land**. This process begins when a woman's *gamana* is cultivated by her husband because it is so small that her labour is only required for certain types of harvest, such as groundnuts, which are winnowed in the field. **This lack of control over agricultural production marks the beginning of their exclusion from access to land**. Further south, in Jiratawa, we found a **second generation of landless women**, who have never farmed because they never had the opportunity to help their mother in her *gamana* as she was landless too. They don't even know how to sow seeds! These women are often very vulnerable, and are effectively excluded from all agricultural work: **here, the de-feminisation of agriculture is a reality**.

The traditional system allowed women access to land through the *gamana*. As long as this enabled them to produce "enough", they did not want any land from their family of origin and did not get involved in land inheritance claims. **Nowadays the progressive loss of the *gamana* in areas of intense pressure on land has led to a situation where the distribution of inherited land is being contested** and challenged on the basis of Koranic law, thus forestalling possible family disputes.

Year	DONATION				INHERITANCE				SALE/PURCHASE				PLEDGE			
	Donor		Recipient		Donor		Heir		Vendor		Purchaser		Guarantor		Taker	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
2000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	43	2	38	7	8	0	7	1
2001	3	0	3	0	1	0	1	0	60	2	59	3	6	0	4	2
2002	2	0	2	0	-	-	3	0	68	2	69	1	17	2	14	5
2003	6	4	10	0	-	-	3	0	36	8	42	2	6	0	5	1
2004	5	0	5	0	-	-	5	1	64	7	65	6	7	0	7	0
2005	0	2	1	1	-	-	1	0	21	1	21	1	10	0	9	1
2006	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	0	5	0				
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>			<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>22</b>				<b>14</b>		<b>314</b>		<b>314</b>		<b>56</b>		<b>56</b>	
<b>% F</b>	<b>27.3 %</b>		<b>4.5 %</b>				<b>7.14 %</b>		<b>7 %</b>		<b>6.3 %</b>		<b>3.6 %</b>		<b>17.9 %</b>	

#### A new landowner

*"I acquired 3 hectares five years ago through a pledge, and have so far paid 90,000 francs CFA for it. I'd already bought 4 hectares the year before - this land was originally pledged but the arrangement kept being extended as the guarantor asked for more money each year. I'd paid 115,000 francs CFA by the time I stopped the arrangement. That land was owned by someone from a neighbouring village who had to pledge his field because of the famine. He was never able to repay me. The last land I bought was last year (2005), when I got a 3-hectare field for 120,000 francs CFA from a young man who was leaving for Libya."*

Délou W, Sherkin Hausa

#### New modes of access to land or new forms of eviction?

Pressure on land is leading to various forms of exclusion that are denying women and young men access to this resource. The growing number of landless people in rural areas has led women to seek new forms of access to land, such as buying and pledging, which do not always guarantee their security of tenure.

**Pledges.** These are usually desperate measures taken to enable young men to leave on migration or heads of household to meet their growing needs – especially in terms of food security. Everyone in Sherkin

Hausa said that this form of access to land is most common among women, although this was not confirmed by the transactions recorded by the pre-COFOCOM (see Table 2 above).

**Purchases.** Land is often sold when the guarantor is unable to repay the agreed debt, or if an inherited plot is too small to be divided up easily. These modes of access offer the least vulnerable women a means of securing not only rights of use but also rights of ownership.

Because they have more available land and financial assets, it is only the less vulnerable households that are able to acquire land through inheritance, and, of course, purchases and pledges. Initially it was only family members that could buy land, then other villagers, and now this option is open to everyone. Traders and civil servants from Maradi buy land for market gardening in Jiratawa, while those in Zinder acquire land in Dungu for this purpose. Many vulnerable households rent land, and extremely vulnerable households that cannot even rent a field borrow land. Women from the most vulnerable households (and especially from young households) are the most liable to be excluded from land and agriculture.

#### The broken dreams of landless young women in Jiratawa

The girls in Jiratawa no longer know how to farm. This second generation of landless women may have been to public and/or Koranic school, but most have forgotten what they learned at public school, especially those who left to become child brides at 12 or 13 to avoid becoming unmarried mothers.

Dreams? They have few of these. They hope to be able to use a little of the money they make selling peppers (two or three measures grown by their husband) to buy a young she-goat that they can raise so they have something to leave to their children. Then at least if they die it will help whoever takes care of their children.

Their main occupation is Koranic education, which they receive from a mallama. Their grandmothers help cover their social needs since these married girls no longer know what to do apart from "sleep the day away", and are unable to assume their socio-economic responsibilities as women. The chain of solidarity between mother and daughter plays an important role here – but the question is, how much longer can this last?

The de-feminisation of agriculture can be seen in terms of both poverty and wealth. In the south, it does not affect women from less vulnerable households, who maintain a good level of control over production and are thus in a stronger position. In the predominantly pastoral north, it does not affect women from less vulnerable households as they do not farm and have no wish to control what is seen as a rather secondary or even degrading activity.

The young men in Jiratawa try to make a living and provide for their families by market gardening and farming on small rented, borrowed or inherited plots of around 0.05 hectares.<sup>5</sup> Long-haul migration is too expensive for those with little or nothing to sell, but other young men sell market garden produce in the market in Maradi, and 5% or 6% go to Niamey, where they can make a real profit. This creates a large pool of agricultural labourers who work for low pay in the fields of less vulnerable households. Women who have access to land through purchases and pledges are increasingly using waged labour for their agricultural production.

**A new agricultural dynamic based on ownership rights is developing in southern Niger.**

This confirms the following hypotheses:

- Women and young men are joining forces: the excluded are forming alliances against traditional rights holders and trying to make the most of new opportunities to gain access to land.
- The structural food crisis has forced men to shed some of their land capital (pledges, sales) and favoured access to rural land by the most affluent women.
- Claims to agricultural land are going to court, with Koranic law used to challenge the way that inheritances have been shared out, sometimes dozens of years previously. Claims are not yet being made under statutory law.

Table 3 opposite confirms Hypothesis 1, revealing that pressure on land is leading to women's exclusion from agricultural production and that the de-feminisation of agriculture is an ongoing process. It shows that women are not excluded to the same degree everywhere, and that there is a direct correlation between the level of exclusion and population density in the seven study sites: the greater the population density, the more they are excluded.

The social rationale underpinning the traditional system has been perverted: the fundamental principles of the indivisibility of land holdings and men and women not having access to individual ownership no longer apply. Recourse to Islamic law is becoming more widespread; and although it is too soon to say what role the introduction of decentralisation and the land commissions has played in the application of legislation, it should, theoretically, become more equitable in the near future.

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5. When the irrigated fields were first opened up, the average plot size was 0.33 ha. The high cost and heavy demand for land has led to the progressive, often secret, fragmentation of individual plots: thus, the initial plot may be reduced from 0.33 ha to 0.16 ha, and the sub-plot split again into three 0.05 ha lots, which can barely be called a garden.

<b>Sites and dominant ethnic group</b>	<b>Agro-ecological zone</b>	<b>Population density</b>	<b>Degree of exclusion from land *</b>
<b>TIGAR</b> (Tuareg/Bugagé)	Pastoral area on the edge of the agro-pastoral zone, fields being established in northern Tanout	2 h/km <sup>2</sup>	0
<b>ELIKI</b> (Peuhls Bororo)	Agro-pastoral area on the edge of the pastoral zone (recent agricultural use) Northern Tanout	28 h/km <sup>2</sup>	0
<b>DAN KULLU</b> (Hausa) Zongo Boubacar (Bugagé)	Agro-pastoral area in northern Mayahi	42 h/km <sup>2</sup>	1
<b>GAZORI</b> (Hausa)	Agricultural area in southern Aguié (Gazawa)	98 h/km <sup>2</sup>	2
<b>SHERKIN HAUSA</b> (Hausa)	Agro-pastoral area in southern Mayahi	83 h/km <sup>2</sup>	2
<b>DUNGU</b> (Hausa)	Agricultural area in southern Matameye + basin (gardens)	137 h/km <sup>2</sup>	3
<b>JIRATAWA</b> (Hausa)	Agricultural area in southern Madarounfa + ONAHA irrigated lands + gardens	150 h/km <sup>2</sup>	4

\* Degree of exclusion: 0 = none; 1 = imminent threat; 2 = ongoing in certain categories; 3 = very advanced; 4 = intense, second generation of excluded women

## **3.2 Observations on hypothesis 2**

**Hypothesis 2: At the institutional level, the decentralised system of land commissions (and particularly the forthcoming introduction of municipal land commissions) should bring greater equity for rural women in the municipality. At the moment, however, people still prefer to use the diverse local structures that determine and negotiate access to natural resources.**

This hypothesis touches directly on the role played by the State and its organs through decentralisation, and the part played by local actors in regulating access to land. It raises questions about the role of the newly established municipalities and new actors in local power relations surrounding the management of land and natural resources, particularly the specific role that women councillors play in this respect. It also questions the how the role of traditional actors (customary chiefs, religious chiefs, heads of household) has changed with regard to land and legal systems (customary rights, Islamic law, etc.).





## **The system of land commissions (COFO) and the formalisation of women's land ownership**

We were unable to examine the question of how municipal land commissions articulate with local land management structures or determine whether they have a positive or negative influence on women's land security because there wasn't a single official COFOCOM operating in the whole of Niger in May/June 2006. However, we were able to reflect on certain elements of the question by looking at the outcomes of five years' experience with the pre-COFOCOM in Sherkin Hausa.

In addition to Sherkin Hausa, we observed several community-based land commissions (COFOBs) operating in Jiratawa, Dungu and Dan Kullu. They do not appear to perform very well in terms of registering and monitoring land transactions: officials are poorly trained or have no means of transport, and records are either incomplete or incorrect. We did not see any COFOBs in the sites located on the edges of the pastoral zone in northern Tanout (Eliki) or the pastoral zone (Tigar). Establishing the legitimacy of land transactions in pastoral areas is a delicate matter that often sparks disputes or even violent conflict, and 'pastoral' COFOBs are being considered. The land commissions seemed a little nervous about the situation in northern Tanout, where land already in use is being colonised; apparently preferring to wait and see what happens.

We also noted that village chiefs and local councils are not entirely clear about the roles and functions of the community-based land commissions, and that there is sometimes an element of competition or rivalry between them (as in Jiratawa), underlain by confusion about competences (especially with regard to conflict resolution, tax recovery and who gets the money from various certificates). For example, in Jiratawa it is unclear where the responsibilities of the municipality and the COFOB lie with regard to registering rural land transactions and municipal land transactions (building plots). Another delicate issue in Jiratawa is ownership of the ONAH irrigated lands and the income they could generate for the municipality through taxes.

Finally, we observed that female councillors everywhere (and, with the exception of Sherkin Hausa, their male counterparts too) know nothing about land law or the composition and role of the COFOCOM. Also, that elected officials of both sexes have little awareness about women's land rights. Female councillors do not appear to feel any particular responsibility to defend the rights of their women constituents, who in turn do not seem to recognise these councillors as their legitimate representatives. Women are either completely unaware that there are women on the municipal council or know nothing about their role, firmly believing that such women are selected by their political allies or other people, but certainly not by them. While it is true that female councillors are not mandated to represent only women, prioritise women's issues or specifically defend their rights, there are questions about the role of quotas (at least 10% of councillors must be women) and their impact in terms of representing women that need to be addressed.

Above and beyond the **representation of women on the council or municipal land commission**, this situation also raises questions about their role in the whole system of land commissions, and how it needs to be clarified. Are they there to represent women, and more specifically to defend their rights to natural resources, or are they there regardless of gender, because they represent socio-professional categories or local civil society institutions? It is interesting to note that the few women mentioned in the land transaction certificates we saw were all categorised as “housewives”, whether they were farmers, herders, traders or even teachers. This denial – often unconscious – of rural women’s socio-professional status has profound consequences in terms of equitable access to natural resources. The quality of women’s representation and their mandate in the municipal land commissions is a key issue that cannot be addressed solely by observing the minimum 10% quota, even if this is a step in the right direction.

There are various reasons why the new municipalities are still not in a position to fulfil their role in managing land and natural resources: women councillors are usually found on committees of a social nature, and an enormous amount of information and training work needs to be done in conjunction with establishing the municipal land commissions, to mitigate the current excesses and confusion in the system. However, this must be done with great vigilance and support to avoid the risk of COFOCOMs validating the current logics of exclusion.



Photo: Marie Monimart

Discussing land transactions in Sherkin Hausa

## Lessons learned from the pre-COFOCOM in Sherkin Hausa: new opportunities for access, new risks of exclusion

The most commonly documented modes of access to land show that women gain formal access to land in a number of different ways (see Table 4 below):

- **Sales:** these were the most common and best-documented form of land title. The COFOCOM in Sherkin Hausa documented over 300 sales over a 5-year period (see Table 2).
- **Pledges:** these were well documented in Sherkin Hausa, with over 50 pledges in 5 years. None were registered in Dungu because pledges are often “ratcheted up”<sup>6</sup> and thus become unworkable. Only one case of pledging was documented in Jiratawa.
- **Inheritance, customary holdings:** documenting these types of title was a priority to in Dungu since it was a pre-condition for applications requesting assistance with irrigation equipment. They were documented in Sherkin Hausa, but rarely or not at all elsewhere.
- **Donations:** documented in Sherkin Hausa (22 certificates in 5 years).
- **Loans:** not documented. Some loans are discontinued due to pressure on land, and some are simply not recorded. None of the arrangements to lend land for *gamana*, women’s main mode of access to land, are formalised with a certificate.

Women were blatantly under-represented in the three sites where we were able to gain access to documented transactions. Pledging was the only form of transaction where they constituted over 10% of the beneficiaries of these arrangements, followed by sales (5.9%) and then donations; and they barely register in the formalisation (certification) of customary rights (0.9%). Loans, which are the most widespread customary mode of access to land for women, are not documented. We cannot draw any real conclusions from these three sites, but it has to be said that the overall trend is not encouraging.

One of the high points of this study was the opportunity to make a detailed examination of the pre-COFOCOM registers in Sherkin Hausa. The meticulously kept rural register was made freely available to us by the secretary, providing an enormous amount of information and raising many questions. A systematic breakdown of the registered land transactions according to gender showed that while women are gaining access to land title, they’re still a long way from achieving parity with men and will ultimately be the losers, since 38 women sold, pledged or gave away land and only 33 benefited from these transactions.

Information obtained from the pre-COFOCOM in Sherkin Hausa revealed that most of the purchases made by women there were registered in the name of their husband, who was physically present on the site when the transaction was witnessed (always by men) and would carry out registration procedures himself. This suggests that while the

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6. Take the example of someone who pledges their field for 50,000 francs CFA. If he is unable to repay this sum and needs more money he’ll pledge it to someone else for more, say 70,000 to 80,000 francs CFA, reimbursing the first taker and keeping the difference. Apart from the obvious need for discretion, this ultimately fails to resolve the problem of how the larger sum can be repaid.

main documented modes of access for women are purchasing and pledging land, **registering transactions with the land commissions could prove to be a double-edged sword by triggering the formalisation of women's exclusion from land title.**

In the long-term, there is a risk that the continued superposition or co-existence of three legal systems at the level of the land commissions will create difficulties. It seems that women are still largely bound by customary or Koranic laws, which rule that if they

<b>Table 4. Summary of women's access to land in three sites as documented by the land commissions</b>					
Site	Number of sales	Female vendor	Female purchaser	Sale M/W *	% of female beneficiaries
Jiratawa	25	3	1	- 2	4%
Sherkin Hausa	314	22	20	- 2	6.3%
Dungu	16	3	0	-3	0%
<b>Total sales</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>-7</b>	<b>5.9%</b>
	Number of pledges		Female taker		
Jiratawa	1	0	0		0%
Sherkin Hausa	56	2	10	+ 8	17.9%
Dungu	16	2		-2	0%
<b>Total pledges</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>+6</b>	<b>13.7%</b>
	Customary holdings		Female beneficiary		
Jiratawa	1	-		-	0%
Sherkin Hausa	14		1	-	7.1%
Dungu	95		0	-	0%
<b>Total customary holdings</b>	<b>110</b>		<b>1</b>		<b>0.9%</b>
	Donations	Female donor	Female beneficiary		
Jiratawa	0				-
Sherkin Hausa	22	6	1	-5	4.5%
Dungu	0				
<b>Total donations</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>4.5%</b>
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>5.9</b>

\* N.B. "Sale Men/Women" this shows the number of female beneficiaries involved in the land transaction in relation to the number of women relinquishing their land; for example, the number of female vendors compared with the number of female purchasers.



are accepted as witnesses (which is not always the case), two women are needed to “equal” one male witness. This does not sit well with the legislative framework into which the land commissions are supposed to fit (statutory law), where the rule of equality between male and female citizens should apply.

The fact is that land commissions are run by men, and they seem to be virtually unaware of gender and land issues. It was the men in Sherkin Hausa who told us that women would be involved in about 40% of land purchases and over 50% of pledged plots. But going through the registers revealed that the real figures are 6.3% and 17.8% respectively. Was this a genuine misapprehension about figures given in good faith, or a well-camouflaged attempt to hide the truth? At the very least, there is a need for greater vigilance and transparency, so that what has been given with one hand (women being allowed to inherit) is not taken back with the other (through transactions registered in the husband’s name).

#### Women’s land heritage in Sherkin Hausa

*“Women were allowed to inherit land 15 years ago because it had become an asset, and we share with our women here. Inheritances dating back 52 years were challenged! Children were claiming their mother’s or even their grandmother’s inheritance through the courts, going to Mayahi and even as far as Maradi. So we had to allow women to inherit. Most of the judgements deal with women’s inheritance. And then, less than 10 years ago they started inheriting from their husbands too. It used to be unfair because women weren’t getting what they were due, but it’s better now. And that’s all because of Islam.”*

Meeting of Mai gida, Sherkin Hausa, 23rd May 2006

#### *The ambiguities of inheritance*

Although inheritance under Koranic law is inequitable in absolute terms (women get half the men’s share), it does give women a formal and fairly secure means of access to land because it is done in the name of religion. There seems to be a fairly strong social consensus in Hausa communities that women have the right to inherit land, and this right is increasingly being claimed, either by the women themselves or by their children who stand to inherit. However, while women’s right to dispose of their share of land and transfer it to whoever they like is recognised, their access to land or control over production is not necessarily guaranteed, as they often have to redistribute the land among their male heirs first due to social pressures and pressure on land. With the progressive disappearance of land loaned for *gamana*, this is becoming the only way that they can get their rights to land recognised.

This ambiguity is illustrated by the case of elderly women with title to irrigated plots in Jiratawa. These women are tired and want to stop farming, but they can’t transfer their land to their daughters because they either no longer farm or don’t know how to farm – so it goes to their sons or sons-in-law instead. In either case they lose all control over production, for themselves or for the benefit of their daughters, who have no resources. Furthermore, as these women often care for orphaned children, they keep their plot so that they can control the income from it and pay for the labour required to put it to productive use. What happens to this land when they die is an open question.



Photo: Marie Monimart

The mayor's office, Jiratawa

And while religious law protects women in the transfer of land, it can also serve as a cover for their total exclusion from land, justifying this through *kubli*, which is also known as "*hutun gandu*" or "rest from the fields" (which denies women access to fields), or "*kublin gona*" (access denied because women are not allowed out to go to the fields). These practices affect many young women in areas where pressure on land is most intense (Jiratawa, Dingu), are starting to affect very young women in Sherkin Hausa, and seem imminent around Gazori, where women no longer have *gama* under customary rights and can no longer farm (either for themselves or through controlling production by waged labourers).

Women's land insecurity seems to be particularly acute in the pastoral area north of the agro-pastoral zone (Eliki and Tigar): transactions are not documented by the land commissions, and single women (heads of household) and very vulnerable women are clearing land north of the cultivated fields (Tigar), even though this is risky because they have no secure rights to the land.



### Securing women's land tenure: a tough task for decentralisation

Do the land commissions secure women's access to land? As things stand, it would be very hard to say that they do. On the whole, they are certainly introducing statutory law/legislation, which puts men and women on an equal footing, especially with the new formal modes of land acquisition (sales and pledges). However, there is also a risk that they will end up ratifying wrongful ownership and supporting dispossession, as in Sherkin Hausa. If they are to work, everyone – men and women alike – needs to be informed about them.

Inheritance is not well documented by the land commissions, although in the long term, the registration of transactions will allow heirs of both sexes to claim their land rights under statutory law. Land is already being monetarised, with *gandus* that are too small to divide up being sold and the proceeds shared between the heirs. Land is in such short supply and high demand that this will inevitably lead to market forces excluding the most vulnerable people and formalise the redistribution of land to the most affluent. At the moment, the land commissions follow the principles of the Rural Code and ratify inheritance, donations or declarations of customary holdings without questioning the source of the rights involved.

The fact that very few, if any, loans are documented by the land commissions, especially the obligatory loan of *gamana*, shows that the system is failing to protect the most vulnerable groups (which include women and young men), who will have none of the increasingly vital "papers" (certificates recording land transactions) to support their case in disputes over land. What this suggests is that in practice, **the diverse local structures responsible for regulating and negotiating access to natural resources are actually used more than the land commissions**. The family is still the first point of arbitration in the redistribution of land or its assignment to an incomer. When village lands are saturated, the customary chiefs (village and canton chiefs) no longer have a say in the matter, as the land is appropriated and managed by its owners.<sup>7</sup>

#### Exclusion from fields in Sherkin Hausa

*Only "the big women" (mature or less vulnerable women) farm here, but the fields are getting so small we can't even squeeze 5 sheaves out of them. "Little" women don't have any fields".*

*So, is this "kublin gona": are women being denied access to fields? Apparently not, according to the women we spoke to, who said they don't call it that there. But then they changed their minds: "Yes, that does happen here! We're not allowed to go to the fields... our husbands buy us synthetic fabric for our clothes, which lasts for years...but if we don't go to the fields we can't cover our other needs. We sit at home sweltering in our fancy clothes! We might be allowed to go to the well or take him something to eat in the fields, but some of us can't go out at all! We're told it's so we can rest, but it's a trick! It's not restful – it's a nightmare because we can't earn anything from farming any more. We're not resting, we're miserable! They're just fobbing us off because they've got nothing to give us!"*

Women's meeting, Sherkin Hausa, 22 May 2006

7. It seems that they are the main point of recourse in cases of conflict over common resources between villages or even municipalities (as with the livestock corridor in Dan Kullu).

We seem to be witnessing the beginning of a transition in the way that access to land loaned as *gamana* is regulated. The decision to make this kind of loan is always taken at the household level, and until recently was guaranteed by relatively equitable social norms – provided land was still available. These days, women have little room for negotiation and scant recourse if they are denied land, especially as religion can be used to support their exclusion (denying them access to fields) and loans are not secured through formalisation by the land commissions (registration).

Inheritance, on the other hand, is no longer managed at the household level: disputes are now taken to the courts to be settled. This could explain why Koranic law is increasingly applied, in order to avoid problems after someone has died. What is not clear is how the land commissions will deal with heirs who claim their rights according to legislation (statutory law), and not just according to Koranic law. It also raises the interesting question of what people know about their rights and their power to exercise them. Contrary to what one might expect, and to what seems to happen in Senegal (Faye, 2004), women in Niger who claim their land heritage in the name of Koranic law are not stigmatised or blamed for precipitating the fragmentation of *gandus*. This began some forty years ago due to the growing number of families in areas of intense pressure on land, and has already reached the point of no return, with some *gandus* too small to be viable.

The question is, will the Rural Code succeed in its mission to secure the livelihoods of rural people through the land commissions? It seems that the most vulnerable groups, and sometimes entire communities, are being excluded, losing their status as smallholders to become “proletarians”<sup>8</sup> who work for affluent landowners. The land commissions will find it difficult to help secure land for any but the wealthier women who are able to buy it, because the decision to grant land is still made at the level of the household. Without a strong political will to support the system of family farms and equitable access to natural resources, including land, the eviction of the most vulnerable men and women from agricultural land will continue. In the absence of any viable responses, it is paving the way for the feminisation of poverty and setting young men on the path to migration or even criminality.

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8. We feel that the term “paid farm labourer” doesn’t convey the acute vulnerability of these landless farmers, who are paid rock-bottom rates for piecework and are totally dependent on the laws of supply and demand for seasonal farm labour, with no room for negotiation.





## 4. The feminisation of poverty: an irreversible process or the emergence of new possibilities?

When we talk about poverty in this study, we are not merely referring to economic poverty, but to the poverty created by devalued social status, diminished self-esteem and respect from others, greater vulnerability in power relations with men and dwindling decision-making powers within the household and the community. The economic aspects of the feminisation of poverty are considered in Hypothesis 4.

### 4.1 Observations on hypothesis 3

**Hypothesis 3: The system of agricultural production has always had an internal mechanism for social recognition through merit, aspired to by both women and men in rural communities. There is a correlation between the decline of this mechanism and the changes in the system of agricultural production, which have led to the ongoing emergence of new benchmarks for competition among women.**



Photo: Marie Monimart

Fields in Jiratawa

This hypothesis broaches the question of the social recognition of agricultural production in agrarian societies: how women's access to land and natural resources influences their social capital and affects the power relations among women and between women and men. It also considers the way that models of female leadership have evolved.

### ***Tambara* and *sarkin noma*: female and male models of agricultural meritocracy**

The traditional Hausa system (mainly found in the Maradi region) developed two models of social recognition: *sarkin noma*, or "master farmer" for men and *tambara* for women. A woman is elevated to the status of *tambara* following a non-religious ritual known as "*tambarci*" or "*kan korja*", which translates as "Bring out the calabashes". This may be celebrated at the same time as the woman's marriage ceremony or in its own right. The new *tambara* is publicly elevated by her peers – other *tambarey* women – and celebrated by *griots* in front of the whole community. This marks a permanent change in status as she joins an elite group of "leading lights": the *tambarey*. Never again will she be a *huluwa*, a "nobody" who hasn't made the grade. The title "*sarkin noma*" is conferred on men during an even more lavish ceremony, earned for the outstanding achievement of harvesting 1,000 sheaves of millet in one year, which amounts to over 10 tons of grain!

One of our hypotheses was that the *tambarey* build their power on agricultural production (*noma*) and the accumulation of goods obtained by cultivating their own fields. We thought that this practice was dying out and that the *tambarey* were the exception, a local elite of old women, poles apart from the young women who are excluded from cultivating fields and even the new municipal councillors. Finally, we thought that the *tambarey* affirmed their power primarily in relation to men: the status of *mijin Tambara* (husband of a *tambara*) seemed to be one of the three things that men feared and which made them the butt of other men's jokes; on a par with being a *mijin Hadja* (husband of a *Hadja*, a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca before him) and *mijin Koundja* (husband of the president of a group/association). Moreover, the status of *tambara* was reinforced if it was passed down the generations from mother to daughter. This 'matrilineal' transmission of elevated status in a patriarchal and virilocal society was of particular interest in our research into the modalities of female leadership.

It turned out that we were in for plenty of surprises, particularly with regard to the astonishing vigour of *tambarci*, the complexity of the power games that it addresses – among women as well as between women and men – and its links with access to land.

#### ● **Power relations between women**

*Tambarci* carries the power to exclude and dominate other women, through a sort of Manichean division between the elite "real women", the *tambarey*, and the "lazy *hulaye* who don't deserve to be called women", who are scorned, humiliated and ostracised. This is a strategy of the successful individual and/or group affirming its "power over" the rest. This power is based on personal merit in passing successive tests that demonstrate values linked to feminine accomplishments (courage, hard work,



perseverance, self-sacrifice, agricultural production (fertility), fecundity...). As Cooper (1997) notes, "*kan korya evokes images of abundance, fertility and the capacity to feed many people*". This power is often pitilessly exercised, and has little to do with the female solidarity that is supposed to protect women from men. Competition to accumulate social capital is fierce, and women have to excel in order to prove their value as a woman and a farmer.

**Tambarci, a spiritual heritage**

*"Wealth is temporary and fleeting, it slips through your fingers and leaves you with nothing for yourself or your children. The tambarci celebration is for "real women": you draw attention to your daughters so that they will succeed, to buy them renown. It's sad seeing the older girls who watch but can't join in (the huluwa). You don't want that for your daughters."*

Tambara Hawa, Gazori

*Tambarci* is also the manifestation of a power that protects and links women, particularly mothers and daughters, against other potentially hostile women. It is a "**power against**", a recognised maternal strategy for protecting daughters from co-wives and female in-laws. Married girls are obliged to leave their family, and the instability of marriages further aggravates this sort of internal migration by women due to virilocal residence, or mobility linked to marriage. The mother-daughter relationship

and the learning processes associated with it do not last long. The strategy is even clearer when the two ceremonies of marriage and *tambarci* are combined, which is currently the most common – and less expensive – option. We observed this in Dan Kullu, where there are over 400 *tambarey* women, and where *tambarci* was still very much alive in 2006. The inheritance transferred from mother to daughter is also spiritual (see the views expressed by Tambara Hawa in the Box above).

*Tambarci* is the expression of a formidable collective power of inclusion too, of investment in an elitist social capital: "**power with**". To become a *tambara* is to join the circle of *tambarey*, women who are listened to and feared by both women and men as uncontested 'leaders' because their power is based on merit and collective recognition of this merit, on shared values. The *tambarci* celebration is a spectacular occasion when accumulated goods are shared and redistributed. This generosity is the complete opposite of personal hoarding. The *tambara* has invested in an 'inalienable asset' that will last her lifetime and beyond – her reputation. **Finally, *tambarci* establishes the individual empowerment of the *tambara* woman: the "power to do".** There are ceremonies, which may be held on their own or at the same time as *tambarci*, called "open your mouth" or even "open your eyes". Assisted by the *griots* and singers, the *tambara* publicly settles her scores with little regard for her victims' feelings. This power to speak in the public arena – often denied to women, and

**Settling scores at the Kan Korya**

*"You're the one who gets to hold the floor on the day of the celebration! You can say exactly what you want, the griot will help you put people down – anyone in the whole canton – and they'll be so ashamed afterwards! You can have a real go at your co-wives. But it's partly for them too. I really insulted my younger co-wife in a song I made up about her – and there was no more fighting or funny business after that!"*

Tambara Hawa, 92 years Gazori, May 2006

particularly young women, is a major rite of passage, a sanctioning of her value. *Tambarci* marks what a woman has **accomplished** in her life.

- **Ambiguities in the power games with men**

Young Hausa girls are doubly socialised to inferiority through their status as females and lifelong outsiders. The mother's strategy to empower her daughters through *tambarci* can seem paradoxical: on the one hand socialising them to be submissive, and on the other, doing everything to get them to "open their mouths".

By spoiling her husband with sumptuous gifts (a horse, 100,000 francs CFA in cash, fine clothes, etc.) and raising his status (a *tambara* also reinforces the social capital of her in-laws), the *tambara* wife flatters her husband and reinforces his power. But by accumulating and redistributing her assets among the whole *gandu* she is simultaneously demonstrating her own power (or that of her lineage, if her mother is responsible for her *tambara*) and the added value she brings through her agricultural endeavours.

"Girls have to sit quietly, talk in a low voice, cover their heads and never contradict a male. From when they're very little, girls are told, "Can't you see that you're a girl and he's a boy?" And, "After all, you're a girl, you'll end up living in someone else's house", or "it doesn't matter what you do because you'll be going to live somewhere else".

Quoted from Barbara Cooper, op. cit

This could be read as a strategy for regulating the power imbalances between men and women, for smoothing over the most blatant excesses while guaranteeing the stability of the system of social organisation, which is based on this selfsame male domination (patriarchy and virilocal residence). In providing a rare opportunity for freedom of expression, *tambarci* acts as a safety valve, and a warning. The men are certainly the masters of the *gandu* (*mäi gandu*), but they must still allow the women power in some areas – both in production and in the public expression of their success.

The interaction between *sarkin noma* and *tambara* is a clear illustration of these power relations. These forms of masculine and feminine success are both related to natural resources, both based on agricultural production and the capacity to accumulate and distribute it. In terms of male/female power relations, the day a man becomes *sarkin noma*, he elevates his sons to *sarkin noma* and his daughters to *tambara*; not, however, his wife or wives, who must work to organise their own *tambarci*. The two statuses are linked in that both are a demonstration of farming skills, and both empower the family of the entire *gandu*, the sons and daughters.

The logics of social cohesion and communal redistribution in *tambarci* are poles apart from the individualistic 'modern' mindset inspired by modes of accumulation imported from elsewhere (the bride's trousseau, furniture...). In this confrontation between two worldviews and two value systems, it seems that the ethical values of *tambarci* have been consigned to history.





Photo: Marie Monimart

Tambara Hawa

### Access to natural resources and female leadership

All the women we interviewed in predominantly agricultural systems agreed that wealth and renown are built on *noma*, on agriculture. This is the basis of all accumulation: "*Women's wealth comes from the fields! Everything you could wish for is there!*" asserted Tambara Hawa. Her daughter explained, "*How can they say that we women don't want to grow anything? We'd be mad not to. But what can we do? You can't make money as a trader because it's all done on credit! The only way to pay it off is with what you've grown in your fields*". In a pastoral setting, owning livestock makes all the difference.

The mechanism for valorisation on the basis of merit (*tambarci, sarkin noma*) is still very much alive in areas like Dan Kullu, where pressure on land has not yet created the logics of exclusion. It may be dying out for men and declining or changing for women, but it still persists as the best or only model for the valorisation of women in agricultural Hausa societies in the Maradi region. However, it is threatened by the decline in agricultural production and by food insecurity, as the *gandu* and *gamana* no longer generate surpluses that can be accumulated over the years and socially redistributed.

The system of *tambarci* is still surprisingly vigorous, operating in inverse proportion to land saturation. Ceremonies are still held in Dan Kullu, while it is 6 years since the last *tambarci* in Sherkin Hausa, 10 years since the last one in Gazori and a good 30 years since one took place in Jiratawa. In communities where *tambarci* is not practiced, women are recognised through the ownership of livestock (these are societies that have grown out of livestock rearing), and are therefore particularly vulnerable to the combined effects of the crisis in livestock rearing in agricultural areas, lack of space and poverty.

Thus, to deprive women of access to land is to condemn them to dependence and poverty. This point is illustrated by the young women confined to their homes in Jiratawa and Dungu, a practice that is becoming increasingly common in Gazori and Sherkin Hausa, and beginning to emerge in Dan Kullu. Confined to their

domestic space, these young women find themselves condemned to a life of enforced leisure and deprived of the opportunity to acquire and exercise new skills; idle despite themselves, and somehow despised for it, both by industrious women and by the men who claim to be *"doing everything for them"*.

There is a correlation between the ongoing de-feminisation of agriculture and the feminisation of poverty in the broad sense: economic, social and decision-making.<sup>9</sup> In predominantly agricultural systems of production it is the most affluent women who will remain in agricultural production, finding new ways of appropriating land that can then be passed on to their sons or daughters. The inverse phenomenon is apparent in pastoral systems that are turning to agriculture, where affluent women remain in the dominant system of accumulation – mobile livestock rearing – while the most vulnerable and ill-equipped women are becoming sedentary and taking up particularly risky and thankless agricultural production. Societies have not found ways of replacing female know-how in the dominant mode of production, or the forms of social valorisation that go with them.

The younger generation of rural women who are deprived of access to land seemed to us to be helpless, left with neither reference point nor hope because there are no credible alternatives and no new models of leadership. One can only deplore the worsening situation, which may be summed up in the plight of Tambara Hawa's family: Tambara Hawa had more wealth, influence and freedom than her daughters have now, and far

#### Power games and tambarci

*"Tambarci is possible, it's as if we're stronger than them. It's something they have to accept when you get married: you're the young bride, and your husband's crazy about you and will give you whatever you want. But despite all those presents, they're frightened!"*

*"The presents are to show you trust him, that you want more dignity and you want him to show you more respect"*

*"Tambarci makes them look big, but it also diminishes them too!"*

Women from Sherkin Hausa, May 2006

9. The same point was made in Haiti in the early 2000s, when the de-feminisation of agriculture could be observed in demographic surveys showing an influx of women heads of family into shantytowns on the outskirts of urban areas. There too, recourse to IGAs did not compensate for the loss of income and worsening food insecurity in rural households. The misery of the large shantytowns in Haiti is only too well known.

more than her granddaughter who farms in Gazori. It remains to be seen whether her granddaughter, who is in secondary school, will be able to develop another model of social success. She is unlikely to be able to do so in her village.

### Where do models of leadership go next?

There are few new fields for female leadership, and limited openings in those that do exist. With no clear alternative models in a situation of growing rivalry between co-wives, poverty, scarce resources and acute food shortages, the new reference points for competition between women are still blurred

#### The twilight years of the tambarey

*"Tambarci's finished. And this is a real step backwards for women because the great tambareys could speak out everywhere, even in front of men! But they're a thing of the past now. Women still try to get their daughters established and give their husbands presents, but it's not the same any more because everyone else is doing it too! Everyone's the same!"*

Tambara Adama, Gazori, May 2006



Photo: Marie Monimart

Gathering grain in Gazori

The model of *tambarci* is on the decline: censured for being wasteful; criticised by various non-*tambara* women and those men who would be happy to see such an arena of female power disappear; and finally, threatened by the religious beliefs of certain *marabouts* and young fundamentalists returning from migration, who practice *kublin gona* or *hutun gandu* against their young women. Tambara Adama from Gazori was clear that disappearance of this model is a loss to society.

The status of *hadja*, the devout woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, is gaining weight (there are 11 *hadja* and about 100 *tambarey* in

Sherkin Hausa). Competition is developing in areas with a tradition of *tambarci*, and some women are acquiring both types of status. The way that women compare the two types of status is indicative of the evolution of these models: the devout versus the ungodly; the hoarder versus the spendthrift, the modest versus the shameless; the spiritual versus the worldly. However, the women we spoke to agree that the status of *hadja* is based on neither personal merit nor social redistribution – it is often the woman's children who save up to enable her to go on pilgrimage, and on her return the newly elevated and veiled *hadja* spends more and more time confined to her house praying. In Dungu, we also found that this status is somewhat tainted by opportunism, since young women go to Mecca for economic as much as religious reasons: they may return with the title of *hadja*, but everyone knows that they worked as domestic servants while they were there.

The status of municipal councillor or president of a group (*kundija*) is not recognised as 'real' leadership because these women have been chosen by others rather than reaching this position through personal merit. Councillors of both sexes believe that their position is precarious, dependent on the choice of others and short-term, unlike that of the *tambara* or *hadja*, who retain their status throughout their lives.

We believe that there is a major crisis in the model of leadership. The decline of *tambarci* is evidence of this, and has been precipitated by a combination of rising religious fundamentalism, scarcity of natural resources and poverty. Women's mobility is becoming more restricted through *kubli*, which used to be the privilege of the well-to-do, while the model of the devout *hadja* guarantees greater respect for the norms of masculine domination. The young women who are shut away dream of becoming wealthy home-based traders, but we didn't find any such young woman in the villages we visited.

**The most valued route towards new forms of leadership seems to be education.** Women believe that " *an educated woman who has a profession is more than equal to a tambara*": an education represents a combination of personal merit and family invest-

#### Competing models of female leadership

"The *hadja* stays at home and accepts everything; and if you become president it lasts 3 years and then you're back to being a nobody again if you're not re-elected. Communities don't have women leaders like the *tambara* any more. They're a thing of the past now, there won't be any permanent women leaders – that's all finished That's democracy for you: you're voted in, you're voted out, and that's it!"

Women in Sherkin Hausa, May 2006



ment (particularly the sacrifices made by her mother), and confers the inalienable status of an educated woman. But the older women are clear that the future of such young women lies in the towns, not in the village! Girls' education is progressing, slowly, and is sometimes encouraged by intervening agencies; but it is still uncertain and liable to be cut short by early marriage once the girl has left primary school. What is needed is investment in girls' education, with visible results in terms of economic success and social position. However, it will still be limited to a privileged minority; and even then, the poor quality of teaching does not bode well for the future.

#### IGAs that generate little income

*"These activities are mainly funded by the traditional savings system or by agricultural activities. They do little to change women's position in society, but do enable them to organise social activities like marriages and baptisms, which are a women's prerogative, and to keep up their economic activities (petty commerce, buying raw materials, etc.)"*

Quote from M. Diarra, 2000

## 4.2 Observations on hypothesis 4

**Hypothesis 4: In the absence of profitable non-agricultural options for women, poverty is becoming feminised. Different women have different concerns regarding access to land and pursue a range of economic activities in order to secure a living, which vary according to their age, status and ethnic group.**

This hypothesis, which is based on our observations in rural areas of Niger, raises a number of questions about women's strategies and prospects: What non-farming strategies have they developed to compensate for their loss of revenue and capital (including social capital) and deal with chronic food insecurity? Do their diverse strategies and activities create any real opportunities, or are they simply stopgap measures to stave off the feminisation of poverty?

### Diversified income-generating activities, minimal returns

Women's primary income-generating activities (IGAs) were initially developed on the basis of **agricultural produce**. Their agricultural production has long served as a means of saving and also provided gifts for ceremonies, while surplus crops (so-called cash crops, such as cowpea, sorrel, okra and sesame) were sold at market to raise cash to meet their basic needs, buy animals and build up a wedding trousseau for their daughters. Taxes are another drain on disposable income, and the monetarisation of the economy has gradually eroded the barter system, which nevertheless survived for a long time in exchanges between sedentary and pastoral communities – manuring agreements, women exchanging milk for cereal, etc.

Sedentary women also used to **raise livestock**, specialising in fattening cattle, sheep and goats. This is mainly restricted to small ruminants now, due to a combination of ecological and economic constraints. Livestock rearing plays an important role in women's economic activities: building up capital that can be easily mobilised in an emergency and providing savings on the hoof in times of plenty (with interest, since the animals

reproduce). It is of social significance too, influencing the status of women in sedentary and pastoral societies, and a major factor helping reduce the vulnerability of households. Women in pastoral communities own livestock (large and small ruminants) that are kept within the family herd, but repeated crises have drastically reduced or even wiped out these herds, forcing men and women to seek other resources or completely even change their way of living (as in Eliko).

Women (and older women in particular) quickly made a niche for themselves **selling processed goods**, especially doughnuts, but also home-made groundnut oil, groundnut seasoning<sup>10</sup> and boiled meat. Trade in processed goods and cooked food has progressively diversified as dietary habits have changed and millet become increasingly expensive (millet dough, pasta known as *tallia*, pancakes, vegetables, leaves and meat in sauces, etc.).

The informal sector is also developing, particularly in the field of repairs and crafts. However, these activities mainly involve men: very few women are involved in the emerging technical sector, hampered by their lack of education and restricted mobility (married young and confined to the home) and disadvantaged by the discriminatory system of apprenticeship. The broad diversification of new vocations is a good illustration of the capacity of informal learning systems respond to new needs, but there is a huge risk that they will accentuate the exclusion of women and young girls unless measures are taken to ensure that they have the same opportunities as men and boys.

In parallel with this, stiff competition from manufactured items like plastic mats and factory-produced condiments has led to a sharp decline in the income generated by traditional female crafts such as weaving mats from dom palm leaves. Women are starting to take up sewing, which was traditionally the preserve of men, as well as making little mats to cover glasses, children's clothes and scarves. Now that the major towns in municipalities are laying on electricity supplies, women in rural areas like Maradi and Jiratawa are also making and selling ice and cold drinks.

**Net profit: half a cent per day!**

*"We have to work because we can't sit around doing nothing. Even if you only earn 25f, you wouldn't get that for doing nothing all day, would you? And it does mean that you can scrape something together to eat every day."*

Quote from M. Diarra, 2000

As women get older – and thus more mobile – they are able to pursue a wider range of income-generating activities. Most older women can travel to different rural markets, where some sell manufactured goods purchased in neighbouring Nigeria, or deliver orders to people's homes. Many young girls are small traders too, selling their wares in the streets or markets, working for their mothers so they can build up their wedding trousseau more quickly. Young married women are the most severely restricted in terms of mobility and are thus more constrained in pursuing or diversifying income-generating activities (if they are not allowed to go the market, for example).

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10. This is made from the remains of groundnut after the oil has been extracted.



Some women from less vulnerable households run their businesses from home, getting their husbands or relatives to buy goods for them. But using intermediaries makes this a less viable activity, and without the opportunity to undertake any agricultural activities it is very hard for them to build up starting capital for their businesses. Married women who are confined to their homes have to keep all their activities within the domestic unit: rearing livestock that are disposed of by their husbands, cooking food that is sold by young girls or from home, etc. Here too, they have little control over the activity, and the intermediate costs cut into already very tight profit margins. In addition to this, they now have to compete with the village shops selling staple goods (run by men) that are springing up everywhere.

In reality, this apparent broad diversification of activities does not increase the opportunities available to all women. The IGAs of women from poor households are mainly based on the direct extraction of natural resources: selling sticks of firewood and wild harvest produce, leaves (except for baobab leaves), water, straw and stalks gleaned from the fields. They also sell their labour for miserable jobs like pounding and poorly paid agricultural work. Agriculture only covers the food needs of the most vulnerable groups for 3 to 5 months or even less, as in 2004-2005.<sup>11</sup> These groups have developed strategies to ensure that there is food on the table when agricultural work is available: the women process cereals bought on credit from dealers in their village, even though they know they'll make very little profit on it, along with several other activities designed not just to diversify their income but to reduce the risks associated with a single activity – which in any case is rarely sufficient to cover the household's basic needs.

### Lack of alternatives

In this economic context, there seems to be a close correlation between loss of access to land and the income-generating activities undertaken by women, which are also determined by their age and mobility and the level of their household's vulnerability.

Mature or elderly women that have the social capacity to undertake viable IGAs tend to be those who still have access to land (the *gamana*) and are in a position to buy land or obtain it through pledge agreements. Younger married women without any land try to make money by processing a few measures of chillies given to them by their husbands, but admit that they only make a **pittance** from this and are closely controlled by their husbands. Furthermore, their economic opportunities are severely hampered by having to look after numerous young children. Mother-daughter solidarity is often their only lifeline, but it means that women have to carry on farming well into their old age to help their daughters and grandchildren (as in Jiratawa). These communities are in the grip of a social crisis that is biting at both ends of the productive cycle: "broken" old women who legitimately dream of retiring are unable to do so, and young women who want to work are forced to remain idle.

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11. At the time of the October 2004 harvest, certain *zongo bugagé* (Tuareg hamlets) in the southern Maradi area only had two months' worth of cereal, and their grain stores were empty by January 2005.

**Alternative strategies like migration** produce mixed results. Migration by young men is certainly a well-established non-farming strategy, but there is new trend for migrants to spend longer periods in more profitable destinations such as Libya, Algeria and Mecca. This requires a significant amount of money up front, which can eat into the household land capital and has negative consequences on the young women left behind to look after the children. Furthermore, remittances are not always enough to buy back fields that were pledged to pay for the enterprise, meaning that family lands may be lost for ever. At the moment it is still too soon to determine whether migration to Arab countries is a viable proposition.

A more recent phenomenon that seems to be developing, especially in the region of Zinder, is the departure of young women to expensive destinations far from home (Mecca or Libya) for prolonged periods of up to several years. It has yet to be seen whether this strategy is profitable and sustainable: the young women we met in Dungu may have got their marriage trousseau together, but they haven't been able to build up enough capital to enable them to embark on any meaningful commercial ventures.

Nor, it seems, are the long-distance international trips made by the famously mobile and independent Wodabe women, such as those from Eliko, able to compensate for the loss of their livestock. They have been unable to reconstitute the reproductive core of herds decimated by successive crises and are now turning to sedentarisation as a last resort, along with selling their labour for a pittance to do the most menial tasks.

This is all evidence of the lack of viable economic activities to compensate for the loss of the *gamas*. Most of the predominantly young women who are excluded from the fields and from agriculture seem unable to initiate any alternative profitable economic activities. Other, older women, who have greater social freedom, are developing strategies to gain access to or appropriate land, which is still the main basis for all accumulation of capital, including financing viable IGAs.

Our conclusion on this hypothesis is that there is a close correlation between the feminisation of poverty and the de-feminisation of agriculture, because none of the wide range of strategies deployed by women offer any viable non-agricultural alternatives. Women's opportunities to invest in non-farming activities are seriously restricted by chronic food shortages, which mean that those who still have a harvest have less produce, if any, to put to profitable purposes. However, the wide range of strategies and activities pursued by women do offer a few rare opportunities that are more than just palliatives to the feminisation of poverty – the most important of which are education and training.



## 5. Conclusions

Given the restricted scope of this study and the diversity of situations in Niger, the conclusions presented below are relative rather than definitive, representing a synthesis of the trends observed in relation to our four initial hypotheses.

### 5.1 Confirmation of our hypotheses

The four hypotheses of this study were confirmed in the field, not only by almost all the women we interviewed, but also by the young men and vast majority of older men with whom we spoke.

**The de-feminisation of agriculture is an ongoing reality; modes of access to land are changing; and the role of the land commissions and decentralisation is still limited.**



Djorki D., a young Wodaabe women trying her luck at agriculture

Photo: Marie Monimart

Although agricultural production systems have been changing for decades, these changes are accelerating due to pressure on land, which has reached the point of no return in some areas, particularly in the south. *Gandus* have become so fragmented that they can no longer be viably shared, and young women are the first to be denied access to land, closely followed by young men. This is happening to various degrees, in inverse proportion to pressure on land: the less pressure on land, the more women retain access to land and agriculture. Women's loss of access to land is sometimes accompanied by the loss of work in fields on the *gandus*, where their labour is no longer required because the fields are so small. We observed two trends:

- **Agriculture is becoming de-feminised in southern areas**, and this exclusion from agricultural production is having a devastating effect on women's living conditions: reducing their mobility through various forms of confinement, limiting their social and economic opportunities and bringing greater poverty. These negative consequences also have repercussions on the extended family: bringing greater responsibilities and pressure to work to bear on the mothers and grandmothers who are still able to farm, and increasing food insecurity among children, which is worsened by the lack of variety in their diet.
- The opposite trend can be seen **in the north**, where fields are being opened up – legitimately or otherwise – on the margins of the agro-pastoral and pastoral areas, sometimes with fronts of agricultural colonisation. Here, **agriculture is being feminised**. Women in pastoral and agro-pastoral communities (Fulani, WoDaabe, Tuareg/Bugagé) who no longer have or have never had livestock are beginning to farm, in highly insecure conditions. This phenomenon is the result of their exclusion from pastoral production and is another example of the feminisation of poverty, as it is only women from the most vulnerable households who are involved in agricultural production.

**In both cases – the de-feminisation of agriculture in the south, and the feminisation of agriculture in the north – it is the most vulnerable women who find themselves excluded from the dominant system of production, where knowledge and social and economic valorisation are concentrated.** In the south, women's exclusion from agriculture will also prevent them from accumulating enough to invest in livestock; in the north, the derisory returns from the fields will (at best) alleviate a situation of chronic food insecurity, but will not enable women to earn enough to reconstitute their herds. In both cases, women's mobility is reduced by their exclusion from the dominant system of production. Another point in common is the fact that less vulnerable women remain active in the dominant system of production because they are able to develop innovative strategies to adapt to the social transformation of modes of access to land.

The **customary practice of borrowing land** (fields on the *gamana*) is still the most common way for women to gain access to land, but this too is under threat. It will continue for as long as there are available land resources, but is no longer a social obligation due to the pressure on land. Since decisions are taken at the family level, women who are not granted fields on the *gamana* have few options for recourse, particularly



because there is often a religious justification for not giving them land – severe or moderate confinement is not always limited to work in the fields.

Women and their children are increasingly resorting to **inheritance** to acquire land, claiming their inheritance in the name of religion or according to Koranic law in order to secure their land rights. If there is not enough land to be shared, it will be sold and the women allocated a share of the proceeds.

**A minority of better-off and better-informed women are increasingly using new modes of access to land, such as pledges and purchases.** These transactions are registered and ratified by certificates issued by the land commissions, constituting formalised and therefore secure access to land ownership under current legislation (statutory law).

These compensatory strategies seem to sound the knell for traditional modes of land transfer in rural areas. They are used by male heirs and women acting in allegiance with young men (their children and co-heirs); motivated by a desire to protect the maternal line and by the complex logics of rivalry between co-wives in polygamous marriages. The exclusion of women is only the tip of the iceberg, the visible part of the chain of exclusion at work. It also affects young men and heads of vulnerable families forced to shed their land capital because they can no longer deal with food insecurity; individuals who are in the process of joining a mass of agricultural “proletarians” obliged to work for affluent landowners who are sometimes, but very rarely, women.

**In order to tackle this situation, the current system of land commissions is facilitating the legalisation of land transactions and putting the land titles acquired by men and women on a legal footing.** However, it can do nothing about the traditional system for regulating modes of access to land (loans, donations), and will find it difficult to fulfil its human development role by defending the most vulnerable since it ratifies both voluntary and enforced transactions. The rights of women are still not protected with sufficient vigilance; furthermore, under current legislation the very presence of a man as a witness or actor registering transactions (under customary or Koranic law) can lead to women being dispossessed of their ownership rights because certificates are issued in their husband’s name. The representation of women and their mandate in the system of land commissions – and COFOCOMs in particular – needs to be clarified. For the time being, decentralisation does not seem to play a significant role in favouring women’s access to natural resources or improving their security of tenure. Men still have the upper hand here, controlling the systems of access to land and its transmission, be they customary, Koranic or legislative, and the power games they allow, which often benefit those who are better informed.

**The de-feminisation of agriculture is a determining factor in the feminisation of poverty, in the full sense of the term.** It is worth remembering that 83% of society in Niger is still rural in these early years of the 21st Century. The mechanism for the social valorisation of rural women was based on a meritocracy that combined accomplishments in both social and agricultural reproduction with the accumulation and redistribution of goods. This valorisation was sanctioned by the title *tambara* for

women and *sarkin noma* for men, and the two were linked with each other. The status of the *tambará* was firmly rooted in power relations: not only with men, where they are marked by domination (patriarchy, virilocal residence...), but also, and possibly to an even greater extent, with other women. Furthermore, it involved the social redistribution of physical goods doggedly acquired over the years and then passed on in the interests of ethical values. The accumulation of goods needed to attain the status of *tambará* was only possible through the woman's individual agricultural production.

This mode of valorisation can no longer be sustained when women are excluded from agricultural production by being denied access to land or confined to their homes, and there do not appear to be any new modes or models of female leadership coming up to take their place in this new context. It is interesting to note that the vitality of the system of *tambarci* is in inverse proportion to the degree of pressure on land. In areas or societies that do not practice *tambarci*, such as pastoral societies, it is exclusion from the dominant system of production that creates devalorisation. Pastoral women who have never had or no longer have livestock also lose their status, and cannot redeem it through agriculture as this is still seen as a palliative and demeaning activity.

The religious model, the *hadja*, offers spiritual valorisation, but this is not a title acquired through personal merit; moreover, it is an individual title that does not involve sharing and social redistribution in a public ceremony such as *tambarci*. The *hadja* do not yet constitute a group as the *tambarey* used to. As *tambarci* wanes, the model of the *hadja* seems to be gaining ground, although it is much less common than that of *El Hadj* for men.

Finally, the new models of leadership presented by presidents and councillors are not widely recognised, because they are not based on personal merit but are reliant on being chosen by others (through election), and are not durable, given the limited length of a mandate. The resistance to this form of leadership (being chosen by other people) is a graphic illustration of the yawning gap between the culture of social obligation and that of representation and, beyond that, the whole culture of democracy. Decentralisation, which should reinforce local power, therefore has a very long way to go before local leaders of either sex gain credibility and recognition as leaders and representatives of their constituent communities.

The model of female leadership is in crisis. Women's effective or likely exclusion from the dominant system of production – agricultural or pastoral – no longer allows them to aspire to a form of social success that combines merit with well-being. The lack of viable non-farming alternatives within the community (village) exacerbates this loss of reference points, particularly for young women, most of whose IGAs are desperate stopgap measures that cannot generate enough income to allow them to build up any capital. Young women have no space – in either the literal or figurative sense – to develop initiatives or get involved in the more lucrative new technologies open to some young men. Most of the medium- or long-term strategies adopted by women, young men and heads of vulnerable families (and most families in rural Niger fall into this category) have to deal with the harsh daily reality of insecure livelihoods and above all, chronic





food insecurity: making sure there is enough to feed the family throughout the year is now the primary concern, every year. Migration is changing, becoming further, longer, more expensive, and sometimes permanent.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the model of success for young women – the wealthy, home-based trader – revolves around individual success rather than community leadership. There is a risk that restricting women's mobility by confining them to their homes will prevent them from engaging with their community. The ignorance these young women display about how their community functions is also a cause for concern, raising questions about what kind of citizens will they become. While the men claim to "do everything for the women, give them everything", these women are largely or even totally dependent on them, which further deprives them of any decision-making powers.

We have yet to see any firm new models of valorisation or female leadership in a context of widespread rural poverty, where the reference points for competition seem to be based on the material wealth of the individual or family rather than their influence within the community.

This is the bleak vision for women, and for many men too. We spent a long time talking with men and women, and would like to have encountered more optimism and positive visions based on alternatives and innovations (in the formal or informal system) in response to the new constraints and opportunities presented by the demands of the urban market, new trades, higher levels of education, local development, etc...But these views were not expressed, so we cannot present them here.

Yet there is one glimmer of hope, in a new model described by both women and men: that of the educated professional woman who achieves social success through a combination of personal merit, lasting status (education) and a certain well-being. This model is not achievable in the village or local community though, and is still seen as the privilege of a minority. The vast field of information and education presents a major challenge – and offers one of the few ways out. The political will of governments and donors play will play a determining role in this, and it is up to them to ensure that decisions about agricultural development are both consistent with prioritising poverty reduction and in the interests of gender equity.

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