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# **Women's access to land:**

## **The de-feminisation of agriculture in southern Niger ?**

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**Marthe Doka and  
Marie Monimart**

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## Glossary

<i>dan dakao</i>	a service done for another women such as pounding grain, in exchange for a certain amount of money or payment in kind (for example, grain)
<i>gamana</i>	fields Hausa women and young men cultivate for their personal needs
<i>gandu</i>	a plot of land managed by the head of the household which is meant to provide food for the whole household
<i>hutu</i>	peace and quiet
<i>kublen gona</i>	the practice of confining women to the home and denying them access to land
<i>kubli</i>	wealth
<i>tontine</i>	an informal saving group
<i>zongho</i>	Tuareg settlements just outside the main Hausa villages that were established during the 1984-1985 drought

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# 1. Introduction

This paper considers the position of women in the social dynamics regulating access to farmland by different members of Hausa households. It developed out of a chance observation, during a study on the factors influencing women's vulnerability in southern Niger where women were being excluded from land. We based our research on a series of studies undertaken in Niger over the last five years, with a particular focus on poverty among women.<sup>1</sup>



1. This paper was prepared for the Praia +9 Regional forum convened by the *Comité Permanent Inter Etats de Lutte Contre la Sécheresse au Sahel* (CILSS), held on 17-21 November 2003 in Bamako, and was presented at the thematic workshop "Equitable Access to Land and Natural Resources", piloted by IIED. It draws on studies conducted in the context of projects implemented by CARE International in the Maradi region of Niger, which includes the "Gender Equity and Secure Household Livelihoods" project; a study on the long-term evolution of social and economic arrangements in the region of Maradi by Drylands Research; a supplementary study conducted for this paper in Garin Jakka, in Madarounfa district (in the southern area of the Maradi region, near the border with Nigeria); and information gathered during previous studies in Maradi and Tahoua regions.

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world with an economy dominated by agriculture (farming and herding). The country's large rural population depends directly on access to land and natural resources for its livelihood. The largest ethnic group are the Hausa which make up approximately half of its people. Niger is divided into 7 regions (*départements*), which are further broken down into districts (*arrondissements*) and sub-districts (*cantons*). Maradi and Tahoua regions also have districts of the same name where the regional capitals are located. Most of the field-work on which this paper is based was carried out with Hausa women in the Maradi region with some evidence from the Tahoua region.

Hausa women are very active farmers since this is considered part of women's work in Hausa culture. Customs vary slightly from one region to the next: for example, women in Tahoua region do not weed, as this is always done by their husbands, their children or waged labourers; while women in the Maradi region tackle all kinds of farm work. Traditionally, Hausa women cultivate one field for their personal needs, the *gamana*, although nowadays this is increasingly used to meet family needs, further reinforcing the agricultural status of women within the household.

How does Hausa society manage land ownership within households when changing dynamics and constant challenges from a range of factors require new mechanisms for land redistribution, which are subsequently accepted and recognised by everyone?

Are the prevailing social rules influenced by demographic growth, the reduction in farmland caused by unfavourable ecological factors, and social and economic factors arising from the allocation of land for other priorities? Do these rules guarantee any kind of equity? Is there a point at which pressure on land is such that concerns about equity disappear and land is simply monopolized by the strongest group?

These questions were examined in greater detail through supplementary qualitative interviews and by measuring various fields in the village of Garin Jakka, in the Maradi region.

## 2. Climatic constraints, demographic growth and social change

The distribution of responsibilities within households in the Maradi region has changed profoundly over the last twenty years. This process of social change began with the ecological uncertainties caused by the 1984 drought and was accentuated by subsequent, less severe droughts. Demographic growth has also created disparities in access to and distribution of natural resources – issues that are inextricably bound up with land.

### Changes in farmland as a result of demographic growth

Between 1977 and 2001, average annual demographic growth in the region of Maradi rose sharply to 3.63%. Table 1 below shows changes in the amount of cultivated land in Maradi region since 1977 in relation to demographic growth. The three years shown (1977, 1988 and 2001) were years when a general census of the population of Niger was carried out.

District in Maradi Region	Hectares cultivated per person			Total Population in Maradi Region			Persons per km <sup>2</sup> in 2001
	1977	1988	2001	1977	1988	2001	
Dakoro	0.73	1.28	1.66	178,107	258,098	429,975	24.3
Guidan Roumji	0.77	1.98	0.94	138,905	210,610	341,833	69.4
Madarounfa	0.87	0.80	0.49	186,305	306,216	431,833	114.5

Source: Data from the Regional Office for Agriculture and RGP data for 2001.

The amount of land cultivated in Maradi region is a function of its availability; hence the fact that the increase in cultivated land is smaller than the increase in demographic growth. However, in the south of Maradi region (southern Madarounfa district and certain areas of southern Guidan Roumji district) where population density is greatest, the area cultivated per person shrank by nearly 50% in 25 years: the population more than doubled (x 2.3) and the overall area cultivated only increased by 34%. We can therefore assume that land occupation has almost reached saturation point in southern Niger.

In Dakoro, in the north of Maradi region, however, the area cultivated per person in the agro-pastoral zone has more than doubled (x 2.4), as has demographic growth, meaning that across the whole region the amount of cultivated land has increased by more than a factor of 5. The expansion of cultivated land in Dakoro district is due to a combination of factors: available land, climatic uncertainties leading households to sow on several types of soil to minimise risk, and an upturn in agricultural activities in agro-pastoral households that has even seen Tuareg women in the *zongho*<sup>2</sup> turning their hands to farming.

The case of Guidan Roumji seems atypical (according to the figures at our disposal): while the population has more than doubled in 25 years, changes in the area cultivated per person have been erratic, increasing sharply in 1988 from 0.77 to 1.98 hectares per person, and then dropping dramatically by 50% to just 0.98 hectares per person in 2001. The amount of land under cultivation has certainly increased over 25 years (from 0.77 to 0.94 hectares per person), but this increase has not followed the rhythm of demographic growth, which has more than doubled. Clearly, pressure on land in the extreme south of Maradi region is intense.

Growing techniques have barely changed during this period, remaining more or less the same in all three districts. Animal traction is still the preserve of better-off households, as is the use of chemical fertilisers and compost. There has been little intensification of farming – mainly because most rural households are too vulnerable to pursue this option – and yields per hectare are low (400kg/ha).

It seems that ecological and demographic factors are the driving force behind changes in the social redistribution of land, which is itself subject to the controls of a new social code. Does the shift in responsibilities within households noted above constitute an appropriate and equitable response to the new distribution of land?

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2. *Zongho* are Tuareg settlements just outside the main Hausa villages that were established during the 1984-1985 drought.

### 3. A new social balance?

The ability to meet household food needs is not only closely linked to the production system, but also to the availability of land, which is an important factor in food security. In the south of the country pressure on land heritage has disrupted community and family land management systems and seen the introduction of new social norms to justify the changes that have occurred.

The cultivable fields that constitute a household's land heritage are shared out in several plots that are frequently scattered across several locations, particularly in the south of the country. This indicates the existence of numerous land transactions within households, such as purchases, sales and distribution following inheritance, etc. There is a direct correlation between the frequency of these transactions and levels of rural poverty, which lead the most vulnerable households to allocate certain plots of land in order to secure their food supply or cope with other emergencies (healthcare, children, getting married, etc.).

Traditionally, every member of a Hausa household has the use of one plot in addition to the family farm (*gandu*). The *gandu* is managed by the head of the household, and is generally larger than individual plots because it is supposed to provide food for the whole household. However, the land fragmentation caused by successive generations sharing out their inheritance has shrunk the *gandu* so much that they now look more like the head of household's individual field. Plots in northern Niger have remained larger (for example, in the northern areas of Dakoro, Tahoua and Maradi regions) than those in the area just south of the pastoral zone, such as Dan Koullou.

Women and young men (married or single) have the use of one plot or *gamana*,<sup>3</sup> while young girls have to work with their mother on her plot. This is the first level at which women are marginalized in terms of access to land. Why is this? Is it related to the young age at which girls can be married, from twelve onwards. Although Hausa girls and boys start learn-

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3. A plot of land allocated by the head of the farm or head of household to young unmarried men and married women to enable them to meet their needs, which are usually social. However, at the moment the *gamana* play a vital role in feeding the household.

ing to farm when they are seven, there is no evidence that unmarried girls have access to land. At best, marriage permits them to borrow some from their husband. This first level of exclusion indicates that young girls have a slightly lower status than boys. It has nothing to do with the availability of land, but certainly constitutes the cultural basis of the trend towards the de-feminisation of farming, as it is part of the socialisation of girls to accept land insecurity.

*I don't farm any more because I handed my field over to my landless married son. At my age, how can I still farm and leave my son without any land? In return, he gives me two sheaves of millet after every harvest.*

A woman from Dogon Marké,  
May 2002

Boys, on the other hand, are allocated a *gamana* as soon as they reach the age of fifteen, if land is available (unoccupied fallow land). These fields were traditionally used to cover their owner's non-nutritional needs, but are now increasingly relied upon to provide food during the dry season, which lasts an average of eight months. Lack of land is affecting this social practice of allocating *gamana* to young single men, and young married men are increasingly taking priority over their single counterparts.

### The practice of *kublen gona*

In the south of the districts of Madarounfa and Guidan Roumji, women are beginning to be excluded from agriculture as the lack of land makes it impossible to extend farmland and prevents vulnerable households from improving their farming techniques.

*Kublen gona*, the practice of secluding women and thus denying them access to fields, is becoming more widespread and is particularly prevalent among young men whose *gamana* is too small to permit them to give their wife a parcel of land. This seems to be a solution to the social obligation that requires heads of household to give their wives a plot; and also entails the notion of *hutu*, or peace and quiet, as it is supposed to provide women with some respite from their work on the *gandu*. Unlike other forms of seclusion, this still offers women the opportunity to leave the house to carry out all their domestic, economic and social activities, but they can no longer work in fields as their labour is no longer required due to the reduction in the size of the *gandu*.<sup>4</sup>

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4. This was confirmed by measuring various fields.

There are various social reasons why women are the first to be dispossessed when cultivable land becomes scarce:

- Mothers have a social duty to assign their land to a married son so that he can assume responsibility for feeding his new household;
- Many newly married young wives have no *gamana* because their husband does not have enough land to allocate them a plot.

This situation shows that the system of land management at household level is beginning to break down, although *kublen gona* masks the economic reality of land shortage since the practice is justified on apparently worthwhile social grounds.

Traditional *kubli* (wealth) involves the ostentatious seclusion of women because the husband is able to feed his family without their help. With this new form of “poverty-induced seclusion” in response to lack of land, women contribute by taking up income-generating activities within the homestead, earning money by extracting oil from groundnuts, selling doughnuts or through *dan dakao*.<sup>5</sup>

The other strategy for controlling land is to exclude young unmarried men after women, although heads of household are sometimes able to give young men access to a *gamana* by renting or purchasing land. In future the trend will doubtless be to grant fields only to heads of household.

The problems associated with land pressure are still being resolved at the local level, by redistributing land according to continually changing social norms. As the current system has already started to break down, what can be done to support this process?

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5. *Dan dakao* is some kind of service done for another woman, such as pounding grain, in exchange for a certain amount of money or payment in kind (for example, grain).

## 4. Changes in responsibilities

This type of change has very obvious effects on the way that households organise their attempts to achieve food security,<sup>6</sup> as responsibility for ensuring that members of the household are fed has to be shared. Women make a considerable contribution in this redistribution of roles, helping meet well over 50% of household food needs.

### Less land but more responsibility for food security

For women in the Maradi region, pressure on land has brought greater responsibility for food security. While women in some areas of Tahoua region where there is more land available are hardly involved in the production and supply of food for the household, the situation is very different in Maradi. Outlined below are the various strategies that households adopt according to their vulnerability.

**Separate management** within a single household. Every year after the harvest the husband gives his wife between two to six sheaves of millet per person, depending on the area. She must manage this stock and the harvest from her *gamana* to feed herself and her children during the dry season. When it runs out it is up to her to manage as best she can, as she cannot replenish her supplies from the *gandu* store before the start of the farming season.

Women manage this millet very carefully, and try to sell cooked food (pancakes, millet dough, etc.) initially to recoup some or all of the value of the millet used, and ultimately aiming to earn enough to cover what she and her children consume. No woman ever wants to have to get the *gandu* store opened and use the “unlucky millet” because her *gamana* store is empty. Supplies are managed in the same way in monogamous and polygamous households.

*If a woman manages her millet stock well, she'll have some left over and sell it to buy herself a goat, which could end up earning her quite a bit of money.*

Head of the village of Barka  
Kada, May 2002

When shared management is successful, the woman gains social recognition for having handled her husband's assets well. In extremely vulnerable

6. We did not survey households whose annual food needs are wholly covered by produce from the *gandu*.

households, some women make it through the dry season just on the produce from their own *gamana*.

The portions awarded to women vary according to the vulnerability of the head of the household, and women in poorer and more vulnerable households bear a greater burden of social responsibility. Given the fact that they are responsible for feeding their children through the dry season, it is vital that women are taken into account when planning how to improve food and land security.

**Shared management of food.** In some households produce from the *gandu* is consumed jointly rather than being shared out between different family members after the harvest. Although this form of management is most common among the least vulnerable households that have produced enough to cover their needs, it has also been observed when supplies are really short and there are not enough sheaves to go round. Thus, shortage-induced shared management is found in the most vulnerable households, such as those in areas like Garin Jakka, where land is in extremely short supply.

### **The head of the household finally takes responsibility for feeding his family**

In theory, all the food stocks from the *gamana* are covered by the *gandu* store during the rainy season. "When the first rains fall, and after sowing, everyone can use whatever millet is left in the head of the household's store. It is at this point that the head of the household takes complete responsibility for the members of his household" (baseline study for the Gender Equity project, CARE International, June 2000). However, since the remaining stocks in the *gandu* store are often insufficient to last the farming season, family members are frequently forced to develop a variety of joint strategies to meet the household's food needs.

The timing of the opening of the *gandu* store varies according to the different ecological zones: they are broached earlier in Dakoro (after the first rains) and later in the south (at the second weeding in Dorowa). Less vulnerable households in a particular community may decide to open theirs early. According to social norms, heads of household are responsible for feeding family members during the farming season. In reality, however, their capacity to cover their household's food needs during the rainy season varies considerably, indicating that the system of shared

responsibility (in which women are expected to feed the household for eight months of the year and men for four) is breaking down.

### **Societal control over land: a mechanism for excluding women**

The principle of limiting women's access to land progressively weakens their capacity to farm through a mechanism that excludes them from land ownership. Evolving with land shortages, this mechanism is more entrenched in the south than in the north, and is particularly marked in Garin Jakka, where young women have stopped acquiring *gamana* since the introduction of *kublen gona*. Those women that do have *gamana* find themselves obliged to assign it to their sons.

Women in the districts of Tahoua and Dakoro are in the enviable position of still enjoying the use of land. In this region women usually only help on the farm during sowing and harvest, when their presence is required because of their association with fertility. In certain areas of the Region of Tahoua women own large *gamana* of at least one hectare, which produce an average of 50 sheaves per year. They take possession of the *gamana* as soon as they have children, and are permitted to retain it after divorce. Their older offspring hoe and weed, and the harvest is invested in live-stock and used to cover expenses for social obligations such as their children's weddings. None of the produce from the *gamana* is used to feed the household.

The example from Tahoua and a supplementary retrospective analysis of the various communities have been used to establish a reference point to enable us to understand the different stages in the process of excluding women from access to land.

### **Mechanisms for excluding women from land ownership**

The process of excluding women corresponds to the need to readjust or find a social balance between a resource and its potential beneficiaries:

- a. Where land is plentiful, women have access to it and enjoy their land heritage. This is still the case in certain areas in Tahoua region, for example, in the sub- districts of Tahoua and Dafan.
- b. When this resource starts to become scarce (no free land) and societal control begins at farm level, there is a perceptible change in the portion of land granted to women, who progressively lose access to land. Inheritances are still shared out according to Muslim law, but the woman's share is given to her brothers and returned to her if she

- divorces. This was the prevailing situation in the south before family farms started being broken up. As manager of the family heritage, the head of the farm was responsible for ensuring that the system worked and for transferring land when necessary.
- c. After the 1984 drought women progressively lost access to land as the *gandu* (unit of farming and consumption) were dispersed to spread the risks of production, and with the application of customary regulations (or Islamised customs). This level of readjustment or societal adaptation to land shortage marked the beginning of women's exclusion from land ownership. Women in the south have to manage with smaller *gamana* and use other forms of access, such as loans, to meet their nutritional responsibilities.
  - d. This phase of land insecurity is followed by another phase that sees women lose access to all land apart from the ever-diminishing *gamana*. The custom of preventing women from inheriting land is a crucial factor in perpetuating land insecurity for Hausa women, while society's refusal to allow them access to land ownership also represents an element of control over their mobility. In southern areas where pressure on land is intense, women are starting to demand their inheritance.
  - e. The final level of societal control observed is the loss of the *gamana*. Does this signal the beginning of a de-feminisation of agriculture? And does the fact that women, even when they do claim their share of land, give it to their sons or husbands, mean that they now see farming as a masculine activity? The loss of the *gamana* is socially justified by the desire to lighten women's workload (*hutu*) or, in Garin Jakka, by *kublen gona*. In certain parts of the south women are starting to gain access to land through the application of Islamic rules regarding land distribution, rather than the customary rules that always excluded them.

Land purchases do not appear in Table 2 below as an indicator of how the land situation is developing, since this is a permanent option that functions according to the opportunities and needs of the household. It is another form of access to land for women, although the customary system of passing on assets through inheritance favours male children, and there is no guarantee that daughters will gain access to any land purchased by their mother when the inheritance is shared out. Not much land is sold throughout the country because it fetches a relatively low price.

Loans seem to have been replaced by pledging and rental. These are the most secure forms of access for both parties, although rental is rare and

only covers one growing season in southern areas. This form of access is open to women who can afford it, usually through the involvement of their husband.

<b>Table 2. Levels of social control over land</b>			
<b>Different levels</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Men's situation</b>	<b>Women's situation</b>
No controls over land	Existence of available land	<i>Droit de hache</i> <sup>7</sup> and inheritance	<i>Droit de hache</i> and inheritance with rights of use
Start of control over land at family level	No available land, but reserved land not used	Inheritance	Inheritance with rights of use
Control over land at the level of family farms (fewer sales to outsiders)	No available land, fallowing practiced	Inheritance	Inheritance, but land remains in the family, no rights of use, <i>gamana</i> loaned by husband
Break up of family farms with land shared out within households to spread risks to production	Less fallow land, recourse to loans	Inheritance and loans	Customary regulations, no inheritance, smaller <i>gamanas</i> ; use of alternatives such as loans and purchase
Seasonal sharing of responsibility for nutrition	No fallow land, fewer loans	Inheritance, rental, pledging and loans	Only <i>gamana</i> ; women start claiming inheritance according to Islamic rules
Shared management to deal with shortages	<i>Gandu</i> too small to divide up	Inheritance, rental, pledging (rarely and no longer secure) and enclosure of fields	No <i>gamana</i> and inheritance only claimed according to Islam

### **Religious basis for excluding women in Garin Jakka**

Women are excluded from land when the head of the family no longer owns enough to need family labour in the fields.

In Garin Jakka social control is based on the Muslim religion, which calls for women to be secluded and kept from any arduous activities. This has led to the practice of secluding women, which is now very common among young

7. The right of the first person to clear the land, often for agriculture.

men and provides an easy explanation for excluding women from family farmland. As a result it is not unusual to see young men with pots on their head fetching water for the household, a task traditionally relegated to women.

The village of Garin Jakka is situated about 35 km south of the regional capital Maradi in the district of Madarounfa, and less than 3km from seven villages along the border with Nigeria. The most important of these in commercial terms is Dan Issa, which is less than 2km to the south east. Because of its location, Garin Jakka has no land of its own and has to share land with neighbouring communities. Its sandy soils are almost entirely used to grow millet, sorghum, niébé and groundnuts. The more fertile clayey soils are becoming rarer due to the encroaching sand.

The first women to be secluded in Garin Jakka were the wives of a *marabout*, who were confined about thirty years ago in accordance with Islamic norms. The practice of *kublen gona* began about fifteen years ago, and has since evolved on the basis of new societal rules: if the

mother is subject to it her daughter will be too, even if she belongs to a polygamous household where the other wives own and work land. *Kublen gona* thus becomes a form of hereditary exclusion for women, which is accelerated when young men's new wives have to obtain their *gamana* from their father in law. Only young women from less vulnerable households have a *gamana* or inherit a field, and more and more of the older women that do still have *gamana* are assigning it to their sons when they get married. The practice of loaning or renting land is becomingly increasingly rare in this community, thereby reducing the chances of women, young men and the most vulnerable to gain access to land.

Inheritance is now the only way that young women from less vulnerable families in Garin Jakka can gain access to land. Inherited *gandu* are distributed according to Islamic or customary principles, depending on the case; and since custom does not allow them to inherit land, women in areas where land is scarce are increasingly demanding that family assets are distributed according to Islamic rules.

Secluded women who inherit land either pay someone to farm it or make it available to their husband. If religion were the sole cause of women's exclusion from access to land they would be able to dispose of and farm their land indirectly, and thus obtain a certain degree of economic autonomy. A new form of societal control is emerging as demographic growth erodes the land patrimony: control that aims to preserve land tenure solely for the heads of household who are supposed to feed the family, and which therefore excludes their married offspring. Will this be the next stage in the social readjustment of access to land?

And with the population expected to double over the next twenty years, how long will this system of exclusion remain viable? Once household members have been denied access to land, will neighbouring Fulani or Tuareg communities who are seen to be farming village lands be expected to return it to its primary owners? Or is this the first of many levels of exclusion within the household?

### **Societal control over other modes of transferring land**

Loans enable individuals (often very vulnerable individuals) to farm a field over one or more growing seasons without having to compensate the landowner. This mode of access to land emerged over the last twenty years, and is now only valid if it has been witnessed or endorsed in writing. The loan is terminated if the borrower dies; if the lender dies first it may be extended or terminated by his beneficiaries.

*Gamana* is a form of intra-household loan. A husband will withdraw the loan in the event of divorce, and it is culturally difficult for a woman to obtain *gamana* from anyone apart from her husband. To enable young people to benefit from *gamana*, the head of a household may borrow a field and pass it on to the family member concerned. This form of transfer is only available to heads of household, and is becoming less common because of disputes arising after the death of the lender or borrower. Pledging and rental seem to be on the increase, although rental is uncommon and not easily accessible to women in the south.

*Gamana* is not usually assimilated into the assets that are shared out when an inheritance is settled. The sons of the deceased automatically retain their *gamana*, as does his widow, provided she remains in the village and does not remarry. Otherwise, her *gamana* reverts to her children or, if she is childless, goes into the assets to be shared out.

Pledging consists of giving someone a field as security in exchange for the loan of money or provisions. There is usually no time limit on the transaction, which ends when the debt is repaid and the field returned to its owner. The person receiving the field is not permitted to sell it for their own profit, but may pledge it to a third party provided the landowner consents to this. A pledge may also be converted to a sale, if both parties agree. Women belonging to a *tontine*<sup>8</sup> obtain fields through pledging, and sometimes end up buying the land.

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8. A *tontine* is an informal saving group .

Fields are very rarely sold. It is important to note that in the family farming system land mainly used to change hands within a family or village: the village chief saw to it that land was sold to a villager, and the head of household made sure that it was sold to a household member. However, with the break-up of large farms, family or community control over the assignment of land is declining, and fields are often sold to the highest bidder or the first person to make an offer, even if they are not from the village or region.

Sale and rental are the two modes of access that are least subject to societal control. The latter is used by older women wanting to obtain more land, and some women buy land through the involvement of their husband. However, with the disappearance of *gamana* from certain areas, women are left with very few options to acquire land since loans and rental are rare when land is in short supply, and sales and pledging are generally occasional transactions used by men to help them through difficult periods.

### **What role should the State or civil society play in controlling land?**

As the land insecurity observed among women is mainly due to sociological constraints, what can the State and development partners do to improve their situation? While it is possible to intervene at community level, it is particularly difficult to do so at household level, or when one wishes to address issues within households. This is the problem with the gender-sensitive approach: if an agency restricts itself to activities that are aimed at addressing constraints such as the exclusion of women, its action becomes a kind of interference. In this case, there is a need to ascertain and act directly upon the structural and fundamental causes of women's exclusion, which will not be found within households, but at the macro-level, in economics, legislation, policies and social systems and norms.

The Islamisation of customs in Niger tends to reinforce patriarchal structures. Customs sometimes contravene legal or religious arrangements, so that legislation on the minimum age at which girls can be married is often ignored, while women are refused their part of their land inheritance despite the injunctions of Islamic law. Legal constraints are mainly due to:

- Ignorance of existing laws that protect women;
- The existence and application of legitimised (unwritten) rules that discriminate against women.

By promoting knowledge and use of statutory and Islamic law in the transmission of land, the State and development projects (such as the CARE project in southern Maradi) can ensure greater gender equity in access to

land – even if this accelerates the current breakdown of the land tenure system. There is an urgent need to ensure that this ongoing process of change progresses in an equitable manner, in order to secure sustainable harmony and peace within rural households and communities.

The longstanding and widespread practice of extensive farming covers large areas and encourages the exclusion of vulnerable groups such as women and young men from land. With no money to improve farming techniques and agricultural productivity there has been little change in the way that fields are farmed. Soils are exhausted, but chemical fertilisers are not a viable option for most households and even when manure or compost is available, transport is a major constraint to its use. In this context – and despite its limitations – agricultural intensification seems a promising alternative that could improve food security and reduce the pressure of discriminatory social control over land tenure.

The productive use of natural resources in farming areas could also have a negative impact if access to land is inequitable, since social codes for managing these resources are put in place as soon as they acquire a significant economic value. Wouldn't the landowner be "the natural owner" of these resources, which currently constitute a major source of revenue for many women? In addition to restricted access to land therefore, women would also lose access to natural resources. Women in rural areas are already vulnerable, and this trend would only make them more so.

The exclusion of women from agriculture could also have an effect on ecological diversity, since women often protect the many species of vegetation that they use to meet the food and health (pharmacopoeia) needs of their household. It also raises serious concerns regarding food security, since it means that women may be excluded from managing food production and choosing what they produce.

Faced with the lack of economic activities in rural Niger, young men can migrate to other countries, but what options are there for women? Since most income-generating activities currently undertaken by women are related to processing farm produce, what other form of profitable activities exist outside agriculture? And what are their prospects outside their community, now that their mobility is restricted by the development of seclusion...as well as illiteracy and early marriage? What solutions do the State, development projects and civil society have to offer? Answers to these questions are critical in the face of increasing land scarcity. As women lose access to this vital resource, alternative ways for them to secure their livelihoods must be developed.



**International  
Institute for  
Environment and  
Development**

Drylands Programme

The Drylands Programme aims to contribute towards more effective and equitable management of natural resources in semi-arid Africa. It has a particular focus on decentralised management of natural resources, pastoral development, land tenure and resource access. Key objectives of the programme are to strengthen local capacity for sustainable resource management, by building effective and accountable local institutions; identify and promote national policies that legitimise and enable local-level decision making and authority; argue and lobby for global policies and institutions that support the development needs and priorities of dryland peoples.

It does this through the following five activities:

(1) collaboration with a range of partners in dryland African countries, (2) training in and promotion of participatory methods, (3) dissemination of information, (4) policy advice to donor organisations and (5) information networking promoting links and learning between French and English-speaking Africa.

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