

**The Role of Agricultural Cooperatives in Women's Agency  
for Their Access to Agricultural Resources:  
Case Study of Baguineda in Mali**

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**Abstract:**

In Mali, agriculture is a significant income and economic development sector. Women farmers are one of the main actors in this realm. However, due to the influence of post-colonial tenure and customary law practices, gender inequalities persist. This is evidenced by women's limited access to property rights. The importance of reducing the gender gap is necessary to achieve women's rights and gendered poverty. Against this background, Mali's government enacted the Agricultural Orientation Law in 2006, which mainly attempted to modernize agriculture and enhance women's land ownership.

Through the oral accounts and realities of women farmers in Baguineda, this article examined whether agricultural cooperatives have contributed to expanding small-scale women farmers' land ownership and access to resources. The study concluded that agricultural cooperatives formed by women in Baguineda had empowered them by significantly improving women's access and ownership of land and resources through increasing their incomes, negotiating with customary leaders, and lobbying local authorities during land disagreements.

**Keywords:**

Agency, Cooperative, Empowerment, Land Ownership, Women

## マリにおける農業協同組合の役割 —女性の農業資源へのアクセスとエージェンシー— ：バギネダ地域の事例から—

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### 要旨

マリでは、農業は重要な収入と経済開発のセクターである。また、女性農業従事者は、この分野の主要な主体である。しかし、植民地時代後の土地所有制度と慣習法の影響により、ジェンダー不平等は続いている。これは、女性の財産権へのアクセスが制限されていることにも表れている。女性の権利の保障とジェンダー的な貧困緩和を達成するためには、ジェンダー格差を縮小することが重要である。このような背景から、マリ政府は2006年に農業促進法を制定し、主に農業の近代化と女性の土地所有権の強化を試みた。

本論文では、バギネダの女性農業従事者への聞き取り調査内容と現地調査から得られたデータを分析し、農業協同組合が小規模な女性農業従事者の土地所有と資源へのアクセスの拡大にどのように貢献したかを検証する。本研究では、バギネダの女性によって形成された農業協同組合は、収入の増加、慣習的な権力をもつ地域リーダーとの交渉、土地問題発生時の地方自治体へのロビー活動を通じて、女性の土地と資源へのアクセスと所有権を改善することに貢献したことが明らかになった。またそれによって女性へのエンパワーメントが見られることを結論した。

### キーワード

エージェンシー、協同組合、エンパワーメント、土地所有、女性

## **Introduction**

Agriculture represents the primary source of income and poverty reduction in Mali. It offers employment to most rural people who rely on agriculture for their subsistence, work, and livelihood. Thus, how to increase agricultural production is a key for socio-economic development, particularly in rural areas in Mali.

Women embody a vast and significant group of farmers in developing countries. They constitute 46 per cent of the agricultural labor force in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> But, their contribution to overall agricultural production and their household income has often been neglected. Women's share of the entire household income is significant, particularly in low-income households.

On the other hand, women tend to have fewer assets, tools, and farm-related resource than men, to mention nothing about their access to agricultural land.<sup>2</sup> Hence, women do not have much decision-making power nor control over their incomes and often depend on their husbands.

In recent years, the government of Mali acknowledges that the expansion of women's land ownership is essential not only for their empowerment but also for the country's economic development. Yet, the policy implementation has been low, and a question remains on how women farmers can increase their ownership of land and agricultural resource. In this context, this study investigates how women farmers' engagement in agricultural cooperatives have changed their position.

## **1. Background, Significance of the Study and Theoretical Framework**

### **1-1. Overview of Women in Agriculture and Land Ownership**

Mali shares the characteristics mentioned above in the introduction. In most rural areas in Mali, there is a traditional division of farm labor by sex. The actual chores performed by females and males vary considerably between and within regions and agro-ecological zones throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Patterns of females' involvement also vary over time in reaction to current demographic, political, and economic instabilities after the military coup of 2012, which led to the crisis in all its dimensions.

Therefore, in Mali, women generally provide labor on their husbands' plots. They also work as independent operators on market gardens, which they cultivate and handle themselves or with their children's help.

Market gardening activities in Mali take different size and form depending on the area. They are called "Nako" in Bambara. Nako means small gardens or vegetable gardens found

nearby the homestead land, mainly on roadsides or edges of fields. Almost every household in agricultural societies practice market gardening as a supplement to field agriculture. Market gardening also supplements the daily household needs of food. Such gardening requires less economic resources, using locally available plants, materials, and indigenous farming methods. Thus, women are often engaged in gardening, which improves domestic and intra-household food security throughout the year. Hence, market gardening is a significant agricultural activity, particularly for women, providing their household needs and cash. Consequently, it can be an income-generating activity for women if surplus vegetables and fruits are left. They are taken to markets for selling, which provide women with extra money to compensate for household needs.

In this context, Mali's government has undertaken favorable development policies and initiatives to empower rural women farmers by enhancing their land ownership and access to agricultural resources with its development agencies in recent years. For example, in 2006, the government enacted the Agricultural Orientation Law, which aims to modernize agriculture and empower women farmers by granting them at least 15 per cent of agricultural land in state-managed areas. Later it also adopted "Les Etats Generaux du Foncier," among other laws aiming to improve the agricultural sector and solve gender discrimination in land access and ownership.

On the other hand, the implementation of these policies mentioned above is not an easy task. In general, men traditionally have absolute control over land in farming regions. Moreover, women's access and control over it depend on men. Hence, customary law usually determines succession and inheritance practices, which give land entitlements to husbands, brothers, and sons, rather than wives, sisters, daughters, or widows.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in Mali, women cannot traditionally own land; they can temporarily grow or operate the farm tentatively. However, farmland can be taken away from women anytime.<sup>5</sup> To improve land security, women generally create cooperatives and appeal to the community to collectively or individually own communal gardens or fields. Furthermore, in Mali, 95 per cent of the population is Muslim. However, to what extent Islamic law affects women's status, including their ownership of land, is problematic. This is mainly due to the gap between the state laws in theory and practice, what people believe to be legitimate and how these laws are practiced.

Moreover, during French colonialism, the denial of Mali's customary and religious land acquisition process, which ruled the country for decades, occurred in 1906, when the colonizers believe that all lands were free and vacant with no landlords. Consequently, they granted themselves supreme control over the lands by institutionalizing property rights. Post-independent Mali's government readopted what the French implemented: all the lands in Mali

belonged to the state, and people have the right to use them, but the state has ultimate control over lands and its resources. Therefore, following the revolution of March 1991 and adopting the constitution of February 1992, land reforms were implemented. Under the 1992 Constitution, equal rights and opportunities were guaranteed in theory to men and women.

Henceforth, the current constitution of Mali is not based on Islamic Law. Subsequently, the land tenure system is a combination of customary and statutory legal practices. On the other hand, people often consult with Islamic religious leaders who mostly exercise informal ability to interpret the Quran and other Islamic sources. These leaders are usually men and most of whom do not necessarily have enough knowledge to interpret the Quran and other Islamic texts. Consequently, the implementation of these texts by most religious leaders' is exposed to subjective interpretations and variations.

Additionally, the gap between rural and urban land ownership is also an essential factor that affects women's access and control of land. In rural areas, the land is the primary source of agricultural production; hence its demand is high compared to urban areas where most people are engaged in the service or administrative sector.

Thus, in theory, women have the right to own land in Mali, but they are often deprived of it in practice. Access and ownership of land in post-independent Malian settings are highly influenced by strong hierarchies based on age, gender, and ethnicity's persistence in determining access to land and natural resources.<sup>6</sup> However, some marginalized groups are beginning to challenge these hierarchies by forming cooperatives that include women and men of low social status to inherit land uniformly amongst all male and female citizens. Consequently, Malian farmers, political, and workers associations drafted the constitution of 1992 that ensures a legal system for tackling property rights. Accordingly, the constitution of Mali ensured all its peoples the right to possess and hold land without discrimination based on gender. Despite this endeavor, uncertainty, speedy adjustment, and disagreement denote claim to property in rural and sub-urban areas across Mali.<sup>7</sup>

As explained earlier, mostly women serve as laborers on their husband's or father's land. Productivity meets the household's demands from collective fields, which are handled by males; consequently, it is contended that women are not required to own individual plots. To meet personal needs, women are given "Nako" or a small plot of land for market gardening or to the products from trees such as shea nuts, which they collect and process either for sale or consumption.

For example, in 2010, only 20% of all Malian agricultural lands (including irrigated, non-irrigated, formal, and informal land) were owned by women.<sup>8</sup> This percentage was even less in all Mali regions in 2012, with 3% in Kayes regions recording the highest percentage.<sup>9</sup>

Within this context, those with power usually can influence, manipulate, and maneuver their way, using the most favorable systems to secure their interest. Unfortunately, this is often achieved to the detriment of the less informed, less educated, and less powerful women. Based on the evidence mentioned above from the literature, inequality between men and women persists in Mali's land ownership.

The creation of women's cooperatives in Mali is thus a response to these challenges, where small scale producers are joining efforts to claim their rights and appeals to land and natural assets. Hence, cooperatives show agency from below to reform the socio-economic environment through peasant associations and unions. Beyond their various activities, most women's collective ambition is to obtain social respect as capable women in masculine structured societies. Moreover, women cooperatives' joint mission in Malian agriculture is to serve their members' needs. Still, in the ever-changing field of agriculture, their mission transcends into channels of economic, social, and political movements.

Therefore, this article highlights agricultural cooperatives' role in increasing women's land ownership and access to other productive resources. Subsequently, the paper will examine whether agricultural cooperatives have significantly contributed to expanding small-scale women farmers' access and the right to land and productivity. This will be clarified through the analysis of how women farmers are engaged in agricultural cooperatives. For this purpose, women's oral accounts in rural and urban Baguineda cooperatives will be examined to find out how women have increased their access and ownership of land and socio-economic benefits. The theory of agency by Naila Kabeer is utilized to address women as an agency.

## **1-2. Concept of Agency and Empowerment**

Structural influences, involving financial, political, and legitimate undercurrents, relate with females' economic contribution in emerging countries. Therefore, females' empowerment is a multi-dimensional subject created at the intersection of structures, personal agencies' constraints, and prospects.

Accordingly, structures are defined as: "The rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems" (Emirbayer et al., 1998, p. 962-1023)<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, Giddens (1984) explains agency as the capability of actors to influence their receptiveness to challenging conditions.<sup>11</sup> The regulations and assets in which the person is situated are tightly focused on altering social structures' attributes. Capacity for agency differs from females' interactions with the organizational policies and resources since the agency is constructed within interconnecting social, cultural, economic, and permissible structures. Thus, cultures, complex structures, and the actor's connection to these organizations through social

change affect her agency.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, women's agency is considered significant for their empowerment. Agency is the procedure throughout which women gain the capability to achieve strategic and practical lifetime changes, and they can use this capacity efficiently for progressive transformation.<sup>13</sup>

Kabeer defines empowerment as the ability to exercise choice and distinguishes between resources, agency, and achievements (outcomes).<sup>14</sup> These interconnected elements are necessary for women folk to be empowered in their lives. Moreover, Kabeer maintains that resources and agency make up people's capabilities, that is, their ability to live the lives they choose. Discernible accomplishments or results should follow these two in women's lives.

Furthermore, the relationship between structure and agency is essential because women's agencies can modify structures.<sup>15</sup> Various approaches enable women in emerging states to change the standing masculine controlled and economic structure's limitations. Women's actions and approaches entrenched in their socio-cultural backgrounds might be transformed through considering their experiences built on their implications and value structures.

This article delves into the extent and nature of the agency achieved by women through cooperatives. How do agricultural cooperatives provide them with opportunities for negotiating with existing structures? How do women utilize agricultural cooperatives to act as agents and resources with existing patriarchal values and Mali systems? The subsequent investigation will attempt to answer these questions.

## **2. Agricultural Cooperatives, Definition and Principles**

Dependency and mutual support amongst individuals have been the foundation of collective life throughout the world. Accordingly, a cooperative is described as: "An autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations via a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (Ratner, 2015, p. 18).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, an agricultural cooperative is a peasant organization that enables its members to have better access to marketing, food processing services, tools, and agricultural inputs for production through collective action. Thus, in this article, the term agricultural cooperative is used for any rural or urban association that plays out any joint activity to serve its bodies without hurting others.

Furthermore, the cooperative principles are stated in the regulations in which organizations exercise their ideologies. Cooperative organizations need to complete specific rules or attributes, which distinguish them from other types of small business or corporations. Therefore, theoreticians and practitioners approved seven principles, which are: "Voluntary

and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for the community.<sup>17</sup> " Therefore, the achievement of any cooperative organization mostly relies on these ethics.

## **2-1. Cooperative Movements and Cooperative Framework Policy in Mali**

There is a great diversity of circumstances in production systems in the economic and social environment in which farmers operate throughout developing countries. Thus, different practices are found even in sub-Saharan Africa. In Mali's case, like many other African states, external pressures to the formation of cooperatives impacted the government's initiative. The initial meetings of the 21st century on social development were held in the Segou region in January 2001. It was organized by the Ministry of Solidarity and Humanitarian Action and led to Mali's first cooperative law. Hence, the meeting allowed all stakeholders to agree on a certain number of significant development orientations of social inclusion, mainly of strengthening solidarity and the fight against social exclusion, social and economic protection of vulnerable groups, and combat poverty.

Later on, December 15, 2010, the government of Mali signed "l'Organisation pour l'Harmonization du Droit des Affaires en Afrique" (OHADA) uniform Act, with 15 state parties in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This Act aims to contribute to the strengthening of a democratic society in which poverty reduction will be achieved by creating and redistributing wealth through the promotion of businesses and organizations based on solidarity and human beings' predominance.<sup>18</sup> Since May 16, 2011, the OHADA Act has become universal legislation applicable to Mali's cooperative movement. The Act also recognizes and asserts the regime's dedication in supporting cooperative organizations by allowing them to expand and thrive.

Therefore, in this study, the term women cooperative refers to any cooperation with most female membership. Based on the author's PhD fieldwork carried from January–February 2020, she randomly selected seven cooperatives with the highest number of female memberships in rural and urban Baguineda out of 17 existing cooperatives with the support of "l'Office du Périmètre Irrigué de Baguinéda" (OPIB) the Irrigated Perimeter of Baguineda Office.

### 3. Research Methodology and Characteristics of Research Site

#### 3-1. Selection of Study Site



Sources: **Map1:** [Archivo.Map commune Mali BAGUINEDA CAMP.svg](#) (July/19/2020 accessed)

**Map2:** [https://www.citypopulation.de/en/mali/admin/kati/2502baguin%C3%A9da\\_camp/?mode=status&map=osm\\_dlr&opacity=0.8](https://www.citypopulation.de/en/mali/admin/kati/2502baguin%C3%A9da_camp/?mode=status&map=osm_dlr&opacity=0.8) (July/19/2020 accessed)

These maps show the cartographical location of Baguineda region in Mali. As displayed in red and green color Baguineda is a municipality town in south-western Mali, a sub-prefecture of the Cercle of Kati in the Koulikoro region. It is 30 km from Bamako on the Niger River. Baguineda had 32 villages in the 2009 population census. This region is characterized by an average rainfall of about 400 millimeters falling from June to October and reaching its maximum during July and August. Baguineda has a light sandy soil and a population of 58,661 with 3336 farm households. Farming is the leading commercial activity in this area. The inhabitants' also practice market gardening, livestock farming, and trade.

OPIB in Baguineda is also one of the three agro-ecological zones that were created before the country's independence by the colonizers in 1926 with a channel excavation. Thus, Baguineda can increase crop production as it is supported by the OPIB dam's water resources from the irrigated perimeter. Water access is one of the most acute difficulties in Mali for most farmers. The irrigated perimeter of Baguineda is under government management, and thus it is different from other types of agricultural lands. Therefore, Baguineda can be a good case study with more potential for women to access and own irrigated land.

#### 3-2. Sampling Procedures

Firstly, a survey of women farmers in agricultural cooperatives was conducted in rural

Baguineda to determine their land ownership. Identifying women's cooperatives was accomplished with (la Direction Nationale de la Protection Sociale et de l'économie Solitaire) the National Directorate of Social Welfare and the Solitary Economy (DNPSS) and the Office of OPIB. Ten female cooperatives were chosen, and seven were maintained. The selection method involved structured interviews with the heads of the cooperatives. Additionally, focus group discussions were also conducted with the seven retained cooperatives, with the explicit goal of defining their level of organization, the creation of the cooperative, its history, sum of adherents, visions, land title apprehensions, their roles in empowering their members regarding their land ownership and access to agricultural resources, relationship with the government and land chiefs.

Secondly, structured questionnaires were carried out with available members of each selected cooperative. A total of seven focus group discussions, seven structured interviews, and 95 questionnaires were obtained from the seven cooperatives. Thirdly, the strategic and constitutional atmosphere around ownership and access to land for rural women, was investigated by performing three professional consultations with administrative staff at OPIB, the Ministry of Agriculture, and DNPSS.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4-1. Features and Membership of the Cooperatives: Case of Baguineda

As illustrated by the table below all the seven cooperatives were recognized, well-formed, and economically active cooperatives of peasants in rural and urban Baguineda. They registered at the district administration of OPIB and the national office of DNPSS. From 1990 to 2017, the cooperatives were created to support small-scale peasants in marketing, handling production, micro-finance ventures, settle and intervene in land disagreements. The cooperatives have from 20 to 300 members, most of whom are women.

#### Selected cooperatives

Cooperative name	Year established	Sector	Male	Female	Total
<b>Benkady</b>	2000	Market gardening	2	138	140
<b>Binkadi</b>	2015	Market gardening and livestock breeding	2	128	130
<b>Djiguiya</b>	2000	Market gardening	6	254	300
<b>Kofeba</b>	1990	Market gardening and food processing	3	100	103

<b>Niéta</b>	2005	Marketing and processing	0	120	120
<b>Sinigné Sigui</b>	2017	Market gardening	4	260	264
<b>Yiriwa Ton</b>	2008	Market gardening	4	138	202

**Source: author's fieldwork.**

Agricultural production is mainly focused on market gardening intended for profit-making (marketing). Cabbage, carrot, eggplant, lettuce, onion, okra, and potatoes are highly cultivated products.

Hence, the author used women's voices from these seven cooperatives to support her arguments and answer her questions. Membership to the cooperatives was only open to married housewives belonging to the same community and practicing either market gardening, food processing, marketing, micro-credit, and animal breeding. Additionally, there were no restrictions on becoming a cooperative member based on age or economic status. Moreover, as evidence by the table above, all the cooperatives except one had at least one male member. This approach is due to tradition's weight and the unequal gender division of labors within households in those areas. The sample cooperatives preferred to have a male member deal with external activities like selling cooperatives products to distant markets, dealing with some physical or administrative works since household chores constrain women's mobility.

Besides, the cooperatives have transparent systems and requirements for regulating the activities of the organizations. Furthermore, they have inner laws that monitor the supervision of the cooperative. For instance, all the cooperatives had a regular payment from 500 FCFA to 1000 FCFA to be compensated by every member to ensure the organizations' expenditures. Likewise, there is an entry fee payment and investment plans. Associates can access credits, seeds, or equipment from the organization. In all the cooperatives, members come together to cultivate the common land, process the product, and sell them together. More importantly, cooperative members support each other in land preparation, crop planting, and harvesting for both the collective and individual farmland. Failures to do so necessitate a penalty fee set by each cooperative based on their agreements.

In all cases, cooperative members are entitled to fulfil responsibilities regarding their organization management. There was no influence from any political or religious authority regarding the cooperative's management and leadership. Nevertheless, they also benefit advice from agricultural agents who are professional staff in agriculture hired by OPIB to assist farmers in their activities in case of opportunities for training, subsidies in seeds, fertilizers, equipment, or tenure rights from the government, donor agencies, and NGOs.

The Cooperatives have several dedicated bodies dealing with management, finance,

disagreement resolution, external relations, marketing, and partnerships. They are also active in defending and changing their associates' land rights and lobbying government offices mainly from OPIB to obtain and secure land access and ownership. In one instance, the cooperative took exclusion cases with no reimbursement to justice to reclaim the victim's yield and capital expenses. For most cooperative members, agriculture is the primary income source, and protecting property rights implies defending their employment and providing them with social accommodation.

#### **4-2. Women's Access and Ownership of Plot in Formal and Informal Land Regimes in Cooperatives**

The sampled cooperative participants gain access to agricultural plots via a range of approaches. Generally, agriculture is practiced alongside the perimeters of the OPIB, which are government irrigated areas. The managed areas by irrigation drains are meant for farming purposes, and farmers acquire title deeds for the plot by ensuring legal processes. Therefore, most lands are privately owned by the head of the household from the OPIB, which provides an irrigation system to farmland holders.

Consequently, certain lands are legal plots (boundaries of the OPIB irrigated zone), private legal properties (entities with title deeds for housing purposes), and traditional farmlands (land commander and customary groups). The traditional land tenancy is the highly widespread kind of contract in the region. In all the seven villages, female farmers have fewer opportunities than their male counter patterns in accessing land. The principal means to access land is personal borrowing from traditional landlords.

Females are underprivileged under the traditional indigenous rule, which denied them the right to own land. The chief of the village Bakary in "Nieta" cooperative noted that only widows could own land by themselves, and adult females must cultivate their spouses' plot. In cases where widows cannot inherit plot from their partners, they might gain access to the farm by asking one of their male relatives or a cooperative to approach a traditional landlord and plead for her. In such circumstances, the cooperatives intercede as a mediator between underprivileged women and traditional chiefs. Accessing land through traditional landholders in rural communities is appropriate for the cooperative groups; nevertheless, they desire to operate with administrative headquarters as traditional landholders will ultimately assert their property back.

Participants encounter related land obstacles as individual peasants; nonetheless, the benefits of being a cooperative member substantially improve their prospects of obtaining extra plot and defending existing property rights. According to many of the women interviewed,

men had distributed all the land among themselves. They only received small pieces of land from men for market gardening purposes to contribute to family expenses. The primary means of accessing land among the cooperative members are borrowing customary lands from traditional families' heads or the neighborhood's chief. Henceforth, land shortage and multiple land systems instigate a bunch of procedures to access and own land. The primary fear of peasant women is that urbanization is quickly changing rural tenure systems. Land deals among traditional landholders and peasants are verbal, and smallholders utilize rented plot till traditional landlords want to cultivate it or make a house.

During this study, the author noticed that land access was more distinctive, where the pressure for this resource was highest. Likewise, marginalization and sometimes exclusion of women and other vulnerable groups were also prevalent. For example, in the irrigated zone, access to land is getting more challenging as households expand; however, the amount and size of irrigated plots stay the same. Consequently, some families now rely on plots as small as 0.25 ha for their livelihoods. In this situation, women can find themselves utterly dependent on their husbands, and young men can no longer set up their households as there is not enough parcel for them to establish their own family. Subsequently, it is not astonishing that the author found that no women had titles to plots in most villages despite the government policy of equal ownership for men and women to irrigated plots. Nevertheless, women in cooperatives could access and own some communal land from the OPIB due to their collective action as will be explained in the following section.

#### **4-3. Women's Agency and Leadership in Cooperative as Resource Access to Collective and Private Plot**

Throughout the investigation, it was noticed that plot access, and ownership is vital for peasants to establish or enter agricultural cooperatives. Property frictions in rural neighborhoods compel females' peasants to unite themselves to safeguard their incomes and activities.

In this regard, Sanata, the leader of "Binkady" cooperative, said:

At first, men used to resist our engagement in the cooperative. We had to overcome several challenges by deciding not to pay attention to what others say and just concentrate on our goals and achieve them. Empowering women and addressing their land issues and access to production factors are among our cooperative priorities. Awa, another interviewee, also added that through meetings, we are expressing our needs and demands.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the poor rural peasants' collective action is efficient in acquiring formal and informal plots under traditional and legal systems. Accordingly, peasants face permanent doubt since landowners can expand on their empty land or offer it to others.

Regarding this aspect, Ba Fanta, the President of Kofeba, said:

Within a few years of its creation, our cooperative has pushed forward women's land inclusion in the community and advance gender equality since our land ownership is fragile with both systems. One of our goals is to bring women's leadership through their land access and ownership with traditional elites and government officials and provide them with real income-generating opportunities.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Ramata from the same group stated as follow:

After twenty years as a rural producer, I managed to create sufficient earnings to purchase a house with title deeds and another two parcels in informal agreements after entering the cooperative. Accordingly, Aichata, another farmer added joining the cooperative, allowed me to double my income. Now I bought a cow and a motorbike. During land preparation, the cow helps me while the motorbike allows me to sell my products at distant marketplaces with better prices.<sup>21</sup>

Based on these quotations, the author argues that membership in the cooperative sometimes allows women to increase their incomes by buying land or agricultural equipment. Additionally, as an agency, the cooperatives help their members obtain land access by signaling new land accessibility to evicted farmers and help them interact with traditional landlords, commander of the locality, and other representatives. The group actively hunts land for its associates with the local authorities and traditional landlords inside and beyond the village.

The cooperative leaders of "Niéta, Kofeba, and Diguia" believe that an official agreement providing titles deeds through cooperation with the municipality to increase women's land ownership would significantly be advantageous. This will allow women to spend in agricultural equipment, increase yield, and protect the natural environment since peasants will take extra care of the property through their tenure.

Three of the seven cooperatives do have land of their own, while the remaining four have agreements with landowners through negotiation. Hence, the cooperatives' leaders support peasants to locate appropriate available plot which can be unofficially used for farming. The cooperatives also provide peasants needing communal relationships with a link to find a

property to perform either agriculture, animal breeding, or food processing.

Marama, one of the cooperative members of "Yiriwa ton" noted that:

Through my participation in this cooperative, I now have access to communal land, increasing my monthly income. Before joining the organization, I have no regular income.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Oulematou, another member from "Sinigné Sigui" cooperative, also stated:

After enrolling in the cooperative, I nurture more ambition and independence. My visibility and status have increased in the family, indicating that these are the most significant achievements for me.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the concept of agency and empowerment discussed in the conceptual framework section, the author argues that being members of cooperatives can undoubtedly provide the momentum for women to change the structures and create the economic, social, and political leverage they need. Women as cooperative agents are proving their members with support, which is a turning point in effectively empowering them and making it a norm that they benefit and own assets equal to men, which contrasts with the embedded socio-cultural practices. The strategies used by the sample cooperatives to offer its associates with a plot for agriculture is not constrained to unofficial arrangements and deals. They have also effectively lobbied the local government to gain access to public lands formally from OPIB for agriculture. Following these lobbying processes, three of the seven cooperatives could own 1 to 2 hectares of land from OPIB for their collective use. They also benefited training centers build by NGOs to conduct their activities.

While the provincial office approves the official decision, the cooperatives continue to push and safeguard their portion of this property and create strong regulations for distributing farmlands amongst its associates. Participation in the cooperatives has grown ever since speculations about their collective land ownership turn out to be recognized. However, the cooperative's core principle to allocate farmland is built upon the number of years spent as a group member. Additionally, the cooperative also retains tight interactions with the community department of agriculture in OPIB, provincial NGOs, and the urban administration. The cooperative managers believe that the supervision of rural plots for farming must be the municipality's task in collaboration with cooperatives.

Therefore, Bintou a respondent of "Niéta" cooperative, purported:

We used to say yes to anything coming from men. Upon joining the cooperative, we learned to negotiate and saying no sometimes. We expressed our concerns. We vowed on what we wanted. We learned to convey the challenges related to our land access and ownership. We are challenging the patriarchal and legal structures which subordinate us.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequently, most cooperatives' individuals do not believe municipal administrative officers since community land designed for farming is being offered to public servants in Bamako for shelter even though they were conscripted for horticulture purposes.

On average, cooperatives with collective land ownership have at least five years of experience. Most cooperatives in Mali started owning land after the enactment of the AOL in 2006. From the seven cooperatives interviewed, many of them were created in the year 2000, which coincide with the advent of structural adjustment programs in Mali. For this reason, many farmers joined or created cooperatives to protect themselves against global market challenges. The cooperatives' heads think that working with NGOs to create projects to expand women's access and ownership of plots can thrive. They have brought NGOs attention to rural governance, adult literacy, food processing since the cooperatives' fundamental challenge in expanding managerial abilities is analphabetism. Amongst all the cooperatives' managers, barely few individuals understood how to speak and write in French, which is the official language, and many peasants simply understood "Bamanan kan" the lingua franca of Mali. Cooperative members think that one of the main benefits of joining cooperatives is to discuss opinions and the prospect of acquiring credits with government and private financial institutions.

Accordingly, Kadia from "Benkady" cooperative said:

The cooperative is our home. We learned unity, self-confidence, and solidarity. We learned from each other and became ourselves. We are now a family. We cannot abandon it. We are now each other's mothers, sisters, and children. The cooperative environment is the most important thing. Through dialogue and exchanges, we challenged difficulties in this approach. Besides, we joined forces with other cooperatives. We shared experiences.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, women's engagement in cooperatives has broadened their visions and opportunities. While providing them with access to resources, it has also allowed them to strengthen their social bonds through cooperation and collaboration. As Kabeer explains, women's

empowerment leads to their agency while providing them with resources that turn into achievements.

The women's narratives also revealed that women's collective action led to their agency. Moreover, women were able to increase their bargaining power and collaborate with customary landowners and the local municipalities. As a result, some women farmers could expand their ownership of resources and establish an appropriate atmosphere for negotiation. Additionally, women's cooperatives' engagement has also allowed them to claim their land rights to local authorities. At the same time, they consolidated their relationship with the local municipalities and private NGOs that play a crucial role in institutionalizing cooperatives' provisions to oversee these groups' conduct towards their members land ownership, management, and access to resources.

Thus, through their engagement in cooperatives, women's agency reinforces their members' involvement in social bargaining with traditional and government institutions to achieve better land ownership and management within their communities.

The findings have also proved that women's engagement in the cooperatives provides them with more opportunities and a more favorable position in their relationships with their male counterparts. Women farmers have gained a strategy to coopt with patriarchal practices and to develop and achieve economic security through their cooperatives as they have become communities' agents. Thus, women's engagements in cooperatives have questioned and challenged the embedded socio-cultural and existing patriarchal value system. According to their own rules, women negotiated with the patriarchal and modern system by opening up room for change.

## **Conclusion**

Among many land laws that have governed Mali's agriculture, one of the most important ones was the Agricultural Orientation Law (AOL) of 2006. This law has emphasized gender equity and supported small scale family farming, implicitly targeting women's empowerment.

The AOL was intended to expand land ownership and access amongst smallholders' peasants but has not mostly helped women because of the failure in policy implementation but primarily because property and title deeds are frequently granted to household heads, presumed to be men. Additionally, the research found most people in the cooperatives were not aware of the AOL existence. However, extension agents and NGOs enlightened them about the advantages of this law regarding their land ownership and access to resources while supporting them to lobby local governments to implement this law effectively. Consequently,

people started to take collective actions to assert their rights and claim to land through cooperatives, which provide the potential for small scale women farmers, to claim their rights over land collectively.

Furthermore, it has also revealed that agricultural cooperatives are involved in providing individual women farmers with informal and formal land access. They have both a direct and indirect influence on traditional and legislative laws. Indirectly cooperatives support farmers by launching extensive networks for obtaining land informally through dialogue and negotiation with traditional leaders. They directly lobby the local government by claiming their land rights based on the AOL principles.

Based on this, the author concluded that female cooperatives play a crucial role in being involved as agents for change in modern Mali agriculture. Through their cooperation, women have improved access to farmland, better land contract protection, improved literacy, training skills to be good agriculturalists, and counter-cultural practices influenced by the patriarchy that usually hamper women's own generating income controls. Therefore, cooperative strategies are needed to be continuously reinforced for peasant women to further understand their abilities as commercial producers by their active participation. At the same time, they can be utilized to negotiate with the existing systems which subordinate them.

The surveyed data showed that the cooperatives have contributed to reviving the rural economy in Baguineda. Hence, the cooperatives under study have empowered women members, by enabling them to access and own land either formally or informally. Additionally, through women's active engagement in the cooperative, they enabled them to access essential products such as seeds, fertilizers, and equipment. The most obvious benefit was economical because women improved their income, but the social benefit was also significant. Here, the study observed that women increasingly depend on cooperatives to achieve more successful agricultural sectors' operations. In this regard, women's activism in the cooperative allows them to act as an economic and social achievement agency. Therefore, this study demonstrated that women as an agency are instead a process than what they achieve. A challenge which remains is how women can realize their sense of ownership by overcoming dependency on the cooperatives. A future study is necessary to shed light on this aspect.

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## Notes

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- <sup>21</sup> Interview conducted on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at Kofeba cooperative.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview conducted on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at Yiriwa ton cooperative.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview conducted on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at Sinigné Sigui cooperative.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview conducted on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at Niéta cooperative.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview conducted on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at Benkady cooperative.