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**Backgrounder: Rights of rural women in Mali**

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1. **Introduction**

In Mali, a rural woman is defined as a woman who works in agriculture, fisheries, or livestock.

According to the 2019 Social Institutions and Gender Index, Mali is among the countries with a very high rate of gender-based discrimination, particularly in the *Code des personnes et de la famille* (the Malian legal system that covers family law), which has provisions that discriminate against women, and customary practices. [*Editor’s note: The Social Institutions and Gender Index measures the level of discrimination against women and girls in formal and informal laws, attitudes, and practices.*] Although Mali's constitution protects women against gender discrimination and the country has ratified an international treaty known as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the challenges faced by women in Mali, particularly in rural areas, are daunting. They have few material, technical, and financial resources and are confronted with multiple socio-cultural barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying their rights.

1. **Key data on the issue:**

* In Mali, women represented 49% of the country's total population of 14.1 million, and 70% lived in rural areas.
* Women actively participate in producing agricultural goods but have little control over the resources that come from this activity.
* In Mali, women own or control only 3.7% of land.
* Two-thirds of women farmers do not use any fertilizer because they do not have access to it or cannot afford it.
* 44% of girls aged 10-18 are married.
* 83% of women have undergone some form of female genital mutilation.
* 35% of women have been victims of domestic violence at some point in their lifetime.

1. **Key information**

*Access and control of resources*

In the agricultural sector, women's activities are mainly based on food crops such as rice, sesame, groundnut, and cowpea). Women also practice market gardening individually or in groups. Women farmers encounter many difficulties, including:

* Difficulties of access to developed (in State areas land is developed through irrigation) and fertile land.
* Difficulties in acquiring agricultural inputs and equipment.
* Lack of training in agricultural techniques.
* Problems of outlet for their production (access to markets to sell products).

Women in Mali are very active in various farming, livestock, and aquaculture activities, despite many constraints and challenges. These include:

*Limited access to financing*

Agriculture is a particularly risky venture given its vulnerability to external shocks (for example, changes in the price of agricultural goods or unexpected weather), and banks are wary of this risk. Women are more likely to have problems accessing finance than men. While microfinance institutions and development projects mainly target women's groups, their ability to meet the needs of these women are limited for several reasons, including:

* The difficulties of obtaining credit from financial institutions (interest rates, guarantees, repayment deadlines, etc.)
* Risks perceived by heads of credit institutions.
* Lack of own funds as a personal contribution.
* Socio-cultural prejudices: women do not have rights to land because they are themselves considered to be the property of someone. Also, women can change their matrimonial home, so when the marriage ends, the plot changes ownership.

*Constraints on access to land and security of access:*

Most of the land used by women is borrowed land. This means women are not able to make decisions about using the land. Although in principle, women have the right to own land, thanks to Mali's Agricultural Orientation Law, customary laws do not allow this, as women are expected to establish a home elsewhere and will be cared for by their husbands and children.

*Constraints related to lack of information and training on modern sustainable agricultural techniques:*

As a result of socio-cultural considerations that assign men the role of farm managers, women continue to face constraints in accessing information, improved seeds, fertilizers, and production equipment. Although women are represented in all segments of the main agricultural value chains, they do not benefit enough from the numerous initiatives that target the rural world. Taking into account the constraints of climate change and the need to adopt modern farming techniques, women do not benefit enough from capacity building in sustainable farming techniques—for example, building and maintaining stone barriers, fencing fields with hedges as a wind break, erosion control measures, and zaï and half-moon techniques—so that they can practice agriculture in a climate-friendly manner.

With regard to vocational training, women are generally disadvantaged in the sense that the Malian state's support and counseling is aimed more at men than at women. Women find it difficult to participate in training because of their domestic responsibilities.

*Discrimination within the household*

According to Mali's Individual and Family Code, once married, a woman must obey and respect her husband in all aspects. Some husbands take advantage of this by abusing certain practices, for example, monopolizing the wife's property.

*Decision-making*

Women's involvement in household decision-making, for example, the sale or management of property or land issues, is a persistent challenge.

According to customary practice in some villages, widows may have to remarry their deceased husband's brothers, often without their consent.

*Division of labour between women and men*

The division of labour between women and men is based on traditional social norms that ensure that men are considered the dominant group in the household. Thus, women are responsible for a very large proportion of household chores and spend several hours a day collecting wood and water, preparing meals, and cultivating the family field.

*Violence against women*

Although in theory, Mali has signed international agreements to prevent violence against women, the actual rate of violence is still high in Mali because there is no system to protect them. This is the case for domestic violence, which is prevalent but not widely reported due to the stigma surrounding these issues and the acceptance of this kind of violence by society.

*Female genital mutilation (FGM)*

FGM also continues to be practiced in Mali and there is no law that formally prohibits it. Despite the government's various efforts to prevent this harmful practice, it is still performed for various reasons (for example, as a rite of passage) in "private" (since it is not authorized in health centres), leading to several kinds of health complications.

*Child marriage*

While the legal age for marriage is 16 for women and 18 for men, this law is not enforced in practice and is instead replaced by customary law, which allows child marriage on a regular basis, especially in rural areas. Child marriage continues to be a major concern in Mali.

*Opportunities to speak out publicly*

Although Malian women have the right to run for political office, women are rarely represented in decision-making bodies or in politics in general. Cultural and religious attitudes and lower education rates among women are barriers to women's full participation in the public arena.

*Constraints related to climate change*

For many years, Mali has been confronted with climate-related challenges that primarily threaten the agricultural sector, including drought, floods, deforestation, high winds and temperature fluctuations, and soil erosion and degradation. Climate change affects rural areas far more seriously, where degradation of land and natural resources exacerbate the level of poverty, thereby undermining the efforts and investments that have been made. The gender-based discrimination experienced by Malian women greatly limits their ability to adapt to these changes, particularly the socio-cultural constraints that limit their economic and decision-making power. Thus, women are often the most affected by the consequences of climate change, given their precarious situation and, consequently, their greater dependence on land as a source of nutrition and income. Women are often responsible for fetching water, wood, and food, resources that are greatly impacted by climate change.

**Organizations supporting rural women in Mali:**

ASPROFER: Associations Professionnelles de Femmes Rurales (Professional Associations of Rural Women)

FENAFER: Fédération Nationale des Femmes Rurales (National Federation of Rural Women.)

APCAM: Assemblée Permanente des Chambre d’Agriculture du Mali (Permanent Assembly of the Malian Chambers of Agriculture)

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