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Mali, Factor 15: Human Rights

### **Mali: Empowering Women to Eliminate Food Insecurity**

“No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women.” Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Throughout history because of many factors and other constraints women have taken a subservient role to men. For whatever reason, women have been marginalized and have faced many challenges; especially in developing countries. One such country which has one of the highest rankings for gender inequality is Mali. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, women produce eighty percent of food in developing countries (“Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development”). Giving women farmers more resources could bring the number of hungry people in the world down by 100-150 million people (“Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development”).

The Republic of Mali has an estimated population of 13.3 million (“UN, 2010”). The capital is Bamako. Mali has an area of 1.25 million square kilometers or 482,077 square miles. Mali gained independence in 1960 from France. Soon after independence, Mali was inundated by rebellions, droughts, and a military dictatorship that lasted for twenty-three years. However, since Mali’s first democratically elected president entered office in 1992; the country had been relatively stable (“Mali”).

In August 2009, President Amadou Toumany Toure, blocked a new family law adopted by Parliament, which would have given monumental rights to women. The law would have granted women equal rights in marriage, inheritance rights, and raised the legal age for marriage to eighteen, as well as various other rights. In a statement defending his decision, President stated, "I have taken this decision... to ensure calm and a peaceful society and to obtain the support and understanding of our fellow citizens". Toure was not alone in blocking the law. Across the country tens of thousands of people demonstrated against the law (“Mali”). In 2011, this president was overthrown in a coup and over the summer of 2012 radical Islamic Al Qaeda took advantage of the Mali’s instability and increasingly weak military and captured Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao. They implemented and brutally enforced Shariah, or Islamic law. The UN Security Council voted in April to deploy 12,000 troops and police officers to Mali to stabilize the northern region, oversee the return to civilian rule and to train Malian soldiers so that they could resume security of the country. The troops arrived in early July 2013. To date there is still much unrest (“Mali”).

Mali is a dry land-locked country located close to the Tropic of Cancer and thus enjoys tropical climate. Mali has distinct summer and winter months. Mali climate has three main seasons. Rainy season lasts from June to October. The winter season is between October and February, which is followed by extremely hot and dry climate till June. Depending upon the latitudes, Mali climate differs from one place to another. Northern Sahara zone in Mali experiences hot and dry climate whereas the climate of Mali in the subtropical southern part is hot and humid. Central Mali mostly receives rainfall between June and August. Annual rainfall measures around 1,400 mm in the south, 1,120 mm at Bamako and 127 mm in the northern part of the country. Periodic droughts due to short rainy seasons are a major problem of Mali. Cooler temperatures can be felt between November and February when the nights in the north witness extreme cold temperature. The months between Aprils to June are extremely hot. The dry Harmattan wind is a special feature in Mali, which blows in the month of December (“Mali: Maps of the world”).

The average household size is 5.3 people, although this number varies from 5.2 in rural areas to 5.7 in urban zones. About eighty-nine percent of households are headed by a man, while those headed by a woman represent one household in nine. Very few households have electricity: about eleven percent for the entire country. Significant disparities exist by residential area: only two percent of households in rural areas have electricity, compared with thirty-nine percent in urban zones. For drinking water, a majority of Malian households use water from open public wells (thirty-eight percent), from open wells in the dwelling (fourteen percent), from protected public wells (seven percent) and from protected wells in the yard/dwelling ( seven percent). In fact, less than half of Malian households (forty-two percent) have access to safe water.

The proportion of women and men over the age of six who have never attended school is high (seventy-seven percent and sixty-six percent, respectively). Less than two percent of women and just over three percent of men have completed the primary level. Moreover, only forty-four percent of boys and thirty-three percent of girls who are seven-twelve years old attend school. The net rate of school attendance for the population age 13-18 is only 10 percent, which means that only one youth in ten ages thirteen-eighteen attends secondary school. With regards to gender, whichever characteristic is under consideration, the level of education is always higher for boys than for girls (“Mali, Demographic and Health Survey 2001”).

The practice of polygamy is rather extensive in Mali, concerning forty-three percent of women in union. This practice is found much more often in rural areas (forty-five percent) than in urban zones (thirty-four percent). Moreover, a woman’s level of education seems to play a determinant role on the type of union: women with no education are far more likely to be in a polygynous union (forty-four percent) than those with primary education (thirty-nine percent) or secondary and higher (twenty-six percent) (“Mali, Demographic and Health Survey 2001”).

For the period 1990-2000, the rate of maternal mortality varies between 500 and 600 maternal deaths per 100,000 births. In other words, in Mali, a woman runs a one in twenty-four risk of dying due to maternal causes during her reproductive years. Despite the continued drop in infant mortality during the last two decades and the improvement in antenatal care over the last five years, maternal mortality remains high in Mali, as in the rest of the countries in the region, with rates situated for the most part between 500 and 1,000 maternal deaths for 100,000 live births. Birth control is limited in Mali giving rise to even more responsibilities for women (“Mali, Demographic and Health Survey 2001”).

Western health care is limited, with one doctor per 18,376 persons. Medical facilities are insufficient, under equipped, and mostly concentrated in urban areas, especially Bamako. In most cases patients need to provide nearly all supplies necessary for their treatment, including medicines, disposable medical equipment, and food. Given both the underfunding of the health sector and some corruption among underpaid and under trained health-care personnel, patients must rely on their social network for financial help and to ensure that they receive proper care. This process obviously delays medical treatment and discriminates against the poor. Statistics show that one out of five children in rural areas will die before the age of five; the child mortality rate decreases significantly in urban areas and in Bamako in particular. Average life expectancy increased slightly in the late twentieth century, reaching forty-nine years (however, the increasing spread of AIDS in this region will have a dramatic impact on this figure). Most people utilize both Western and traditional systems of medicine (“Countries and Their Cultures”).

One of the most ghastly practices for those in the western world to understand is the practice of Female Genital Mutilation or female circumcision. Female circumcision is a serious public health problem. Young girls are exposed to high risks of infection and hemorrhage and make child birth difficult for many women. In Mali, ninety-two percent of women age fifteen-forty-nine said they have been circumcised. No

significant variation in the proportion of circumcised women can be found by age group which leads one to believe that this practice is enduring from one generation to the next. Proportions of circumcised women vary from a low of eighty-eight percent in the region of Mopti to a high of ninety-eight percent in Kayes (“Mali, Demographic and Health Survey 2001”).

Many Malian women are anemic especially during pregnancy. This is largely due to their poor diet and food scarcity. Malian families invest more than half of their household income in food expenditures. In the cities, rice is the preferred dish (forty percent of the daily food intake), followed by cereals (sorghum and millet, thirty-five percent), peanuts, sugar, and oil (twenty percent). In the rural areas where rice is produced, farmers tend to consider rice a luxury item and they sell it. Their basic staples are millet, sorghum, and fonio (a West African cereal) that are consumed in a variety of ways: served with sauces with fish or meat and various vegetables, or in the form of porridge (mixed with water, sugar, and fresh or powdered milk). Meat is too expensive to be eaten often, so it is rare (“Countries and Their Cultures”).

Prior to colonization, land was not a commodity. Among the Bamana agriculturists, access to the land (that is, the right to cultivate a piece of land, not individual ownership) was often mediated by the so-called "land chief" who was often a respected elder from the first family to settle in the area. The land chief was in charge of distributing the land among the various lineages of the village. Lineage members would collectively cultivate the land and the lineage chief would be in charge of the redistribution of resources among individual households according to their perceived needs. However, conflicts among households of the same lineage would periodically arise and often lead to further disputes within the lineage. Besides collective farming, individuals of both genders could cultivate smaller fields on the side and independently manage their revenues. The colonial conquest has greatly complicated the issue of property. At the present, local systems for the allocation of property, Islamic law, and colonially derived property rules coexist, but not without conflict, side by side. Women are not often able to own or control land, thus widening the disparity gap between the genders (“Countries and Their Cultures”).

Mali's land resource inventory includes forty-six million hectares of land suitable for agricultural use of which one quarter is suitable for crop production and two thirds as pasture, with the remainder being forest and wildlife reserves. Mali's 2004 agricultural census identified 8.9 million people, or seventy-nine percent of the estimated total population, with livelihoods based on agriculture. Amongst the 805,000 farm households seventy-five percent practice mixed farming; ten percent cultivate only crops, ten percent livestock only, with the remainder involved in fishing (PNIA, 2009). The average farm size for crop-based farming is 4.7 hectares, with one third of households farming less than one hectare. Fewer than five percent of households have landholdings more than twenty hectares. Land preparation is carried out using animal traction for more than seventy percent of cropped area compared to just one percent using mechanized power. Around forty percent of households had access to agricultural extension, but the information was provided by women extension workers in only two percent of cases (Mali's Agricultural Sector: Trends and Performance).

The typical Malian farm is relatively small. The Malian economy is principally based on the cultivation of cotton (Mali is the second largest producer of cotton in Africa), food crops (rice, millet, sorghum, fonio, peanuts, and corn), and livestock (cattle, sheep, and goats). According to official statistics, Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. Solidarity links among family members, neighbors, and coworkers; entrepreneurial skills; and redistributive practices, however, go a long way to ease difficult economic conditions when possible (“Countries and Their Cultures”).

The situation in Mali for women is desperate. Empowering women to meet the growing problems in Mali is essential. Yvette Cissé, farmer from Yanfolilila, Mali, traveled to the US for the first time for Oxfam America's 2011 International Women's Day celebration. In the midst of an East Coast speaking tour,

Cissé reported about the biggest challenge facing her community today: hunger. “When I was young, we’d eat three meals a day, but that’s not the case anymore,” said the soft-spoken mother of six. She said, “Unpredictable rainfall, combined with chemicals used to grow cotton. Mali’s biggest commercial crop has weakened the soil and made it hard for farmers to produce enough to earn a living.”

As treasurer of an organization called the Malian Organic Movement, Cissé is working toward a solution. Her group trains 8,000 local farmers to use organic growing methods. Going organic improves both the soil and farmers’ incomes, since organic cotton and other products fetch higher prices on the international market. About a third of the farmers in Cissé’s organization are women. Many are defying gender roles by growing cash crops like cotton, which is traditionally considered men’s work. With support from Oxfam, women members also learn reading, writing, accounting, and entrepreneurial skills.

“Education has worked wonders,” said Cissé, who said the knowledge gives women confidence to become leaders in their communities. And because women farmers often use their earnings to pay school fees or put food on the table, their children also benefit. If women farmers had the same level of access to resources that men have, they could increase yields on their farms by twenty to thirty percent—vital gains at a time when about one in seven people goes hungry. Today, with Mali among the West African countries at risk of a serious food crisis, Cissé’s work seems more essential than ever. No doubt she and other women will play an important role in helping families’ weather tough times ahead. After all, as Cissé put it: “If women are successful in their efforts, everyone benefits. Development for the whole household and the whole community is provided by programs such as these.”(Oxfam)

Policies must be implemented and enforced. In many countries laws are made that would greatly impact women but they are not enforced. Such is the case of Female Genital Mutilation. In many countries FGM is outlawed and it is not performed in sterile, state operated hospitals. However the practice is still widespread and is done in an unsafe manner without sterile conditions. This law must be enforced. Not only does it pose a health risk but it also takes an emotional toll on women suffering. Many women report that they do not want this done to their daughters but the social pressures do not give them a say in preventing this procedure.

Men and women should own the world as a mutual possession.—(Pearl S. Buck. ) Land must be able to be acquired and held by women. Often when a husband dies, the woman’s land ownership reverts back to her husband’s family. The woman never knows if she will be displaced until she is being evicted by the new owners. This mentality does not encourage women to make permanent improvements which would increase her productivity.

Women need resources to improve the land. Women do not have resources because most are impoverished therefore loans must be available for women. Micro loans may be the answer. Large loans could be attractive however small loans (less than \$200) would be enough to give a woman a good start and one that would empower her to do more on her farm. Another goal is to allow the women to pay them off and feel the sense of accomplishment in conducting business successfully.

Surveys show that eighty-five to ninety percent of time spent on household cooking is woman’s time (“The Role of Women in Rural Development, Food Production and Poverty Eradication”). This is time she could be spending in the field. Much of the time is spent on finding firewood or securing charcoal for burning which is not ecologically sound. Deforestation is a big problem in Mali and a solution has been found in solar technology. Solar and hybrid stoves which have basket-like apparatus and keep food warm without burning offer women a chance to maximize their time and provide hot meals for the sick or HIV/AIDS patient. Caring for the sick is also women’s work and this would allow them an opportunity to return to the fields without an interruption in care. These cost effective stoves are very inexpensive and

most women surveyed are very happy with their operation (“Mali, Demographic and Health Survey 2001”).

Research confirms that in the hands of women, an increase in family income improves children’s health, nutrition and education. Education is key and something that cannot be taken away. One study showed that women’s education contributed forty-three percent of a reduction in child malnutrition over time, while food availability is temporary and accounted for only a twenty-six percent reduction (“Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development”). As the old saying goes, “give a man a fish and he will eat today: teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.”

When a crisis hits, women are generally the first to sacrifice for their children (“Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children”). When resources are plentiful, women are the first to provide extra resources to their children. It is a win/win situation to empower women. Increase the education, health and social status of women and their children will be the beneficiaries. Mothers traditionally give all they can to their children. Empowering and improving women’s lives will guarantee that the well-being of future generations is secured.

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