

Women and Land

in_focus

CASE STUDY
SENEGAL

Equality a collective effort in Senegal

Elected officials and religious leaders have joined forces with researchers documenting Senegalese women's unequal access to land. They are raising awareness among women, and men, while encouraging women to participate in decision-making bodies.

Laws and traditions are at loggerheads in Senegal over women's rights to land. While legal reforms over the past two decades grant women equal access to land, traditional practices deny them that right. This is true throughout the country, even though more than three-quarters of women who are economically active in Senegal work on the land in agriculture.

Senegal is a country of many ethnicities and diverse agricultural zones. The Wolof and Sérère predominate in the country's Peanut Basin, where they grow cash crops such as peanuts and millet. In the Casamance, most people are Diola and produce rice. In the wooded grasslands, Peul nomads use land to pasture livestock. People in these and other zones follow a variety of customs. No matter how diverse their practices may be, however, they share a common characteristic: they overlook women when making decisions about land.

Customary practices with regard to land have prevailed despite the introduction over the past 40 years of several legal instruments that dictate new behaviours. A 1964 law, for example, declared most of Senegal's rural land to be a national heritage, precluding private ownership. In 1996, as part of the country's decentralization process, rural councils were given the authority to manage and allocate this nationally held land. By bringing decision-making close to the citizens, this provided an opportunity for women to have greater access to natural resources, and more of a say in managing them. But this never happened.



Jeremy Hartley/Panos

Researchers found that Senegalese women who are politically active also tend to have access to land.

Powerful private sphere

The 2001 Constitution also gave women and men equal access to land and natural resources, with little effect. Moreover, Senegal has ratified all international protocols, laws, and rules guaranteeing the rights of women to access and control land. But decisions to loan or bequeath land continue to be made in the private sphere of the family, by the head of the household, following the patriarchal tradition.

"According to the law, if someone works a piece of land and dies, the children or the wife should go to the rural council and request to have the land assigned to them. And they would be given priority by law," says Fatou Diop Sall, coordinator of the Groupe d'Études et de Recherches Genre et Société (GESTES) at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint Louis, Senegal.

In reality, however, heads of households “redistribute the land to their heirs, who are often brothers, sometimes children, and rarely wives,” she adds. This unofficial ownership operates alongside the formal laws. The rare few who want the administrative papers to make their hold on the land official will approach the rural council and request that the land be assigned to them. Most councils, comprising local heads of households, will simply ratify the family decision, Diop Sall explains.

That may be because these councils are made up primarily of traditional families, she adds. Traditional chiefs become councilors and presidents of rural councils, and the women who are active in such organizations tend to be the chiefs’ wives or sisters.

Farming on borrowed land

Diop Sall led an IDRC-supported study covering Senegal’s six main agricultural regions. The GESTES team looked at government statistics, surveyed women and men in their households, held focus group discussions, and pored over rural council decisions. The researchers found that 20% to 80% of women, depending on the zone, had access to land through their families. This access consisted mostly of permissions to cultivate small plots of land. These were temporary loans.



Senegal’s Constitution grants men and women equal access to land, but traditional practices often deny women that right.

Women tend not to request official assignment of land unless they are part of a group, the GESTES research found. Women’s associations do request land from rural councils, and the resulting official record helps association members access credit and expand production. They also become eligible to receive seeds distributed through national government programs.

Women have many duties and roles that impede their control over resources. They often lack the financial means to buy the necessary inputs.

Most of the women surveyed believe that they should have equal access to land. They identified a variety of social, religious, administrative, and technical obstacles preventing them from doing so. For example, women have many duties and roles that impede their control over resources. They often lack the financial means to buy the necessary inputs. Water shortages increase women’s workloads and hamper production. The lack of roads and means of transportation hinder their access to markets for the products. Other constraints women face include degraded land, low levels of education, and lack of participation in local organizations.

What’s more, 38% of the women and 42% of the men surveyed did not think that women needed equal access to land. For Diop Sall, this points to the need to educate and raise awareness in Senegal. Women also have to become more active citizens and participate in managing local affairs. The country’s development is in the balance, she says. “This could change their way of life, their social status, and their children’s future — their sons’ and especially their daughters’ futures.”

Diop Sall believes that her group’s research results are set to influence the land-reform debate in Senegal and encourage support for the idea that it is in everyone’s interests for women to have secure access to land. In some areas, it is a question of survival. With men migrating to other parts of Senegal or other countries, more women head households. “In certain areas, it is in fact women who take care of feeding and maintaining families, because the husbands are not there. If they don’t have access to land, if they are dependent, if they borrow, it’s a problem,” she says.

Solutions in action

Women's tenuous access to land also emerged as a key issue for Enda Pronat, a Senegalese group for the protection of nature that is part of the international non-governmental organization Enda Third World. Enda Pronat helps rural communities adopt sustainable agricultural practices, such as planting trees to fertilize the fields and applying organic matter to the soil — measures that can take several years to yield results.

"As soon as the woman starts to improve the land, the husband or the friend, whoever loaned the land, tells them to clear off," says Enda Pronat coordinator Mariam Sow.

The organization leads IDRC-supported research to better understand the obstacles to women's secure access to land, as well as measures to overcome them. Together with university researchers — including Fatou Diop Sall — and in close collaboration with producers' organizations, religious leaders, and decision-makers, Enda Pronat is testing measures that could improve the situation.

Islam not a barrier

Not all traditional practices are detrimental to women. Among the Diola, for example, the wife of the head of the household has the right to give a plot to her daughter-in-law when her son marries. In the semi-desert Fouta region, some parts of the Senegal River floodplain are reserved for women. Nor does Islam deny women their right to land, contrary to popular belief in Senegal.

Islamic religious leaders who researched the question clarified that Islam does not forbid women from owning land.

"Many said that religion was the obstacle, but we discovered that this wasn't the case," says Sow. Islamic religious leaders who researched the question clarified that Islam does not forbid women from owning land. They shared their results with other imams and are encouraging them to address the issue in their Friday sermons. Islam is practised by about 90% of Senegal's population.

Two religious leaders travelled with the research team to share the results of the research in rural communities. Local imams usually participated in these events.



Trees for the Future/flickr

Women in Senegal generally do not apply for the official record assigning land to them unless they are part of a group.

"Custom has privileged men in inheritances, which is abnormal," said an imam from Keur Moussa, near Dakar. "I think that custom should not be relied on unless it adheres to the standards of sharing dictated by religion, because according to it, women have a right to land."

"Men alone often encounter difficulties with their land," another imam observed. "So if women are allowed to address their own problems, they can help men with land management."

Women's political participation

Both Fatou Diop Sall and Mariam Sow agree that change will be brought about by raising awareness and encouraging women to take part in decision-making. To do so, the GESTES team attracted support from the American aid agency, USAID, to translate legal documents into the languages used in the six zones under study. The team is also working with the Association des juristes sénégalaises to offer training on women's land rights and community leadership. Women leaders often accompany them.

Indeed, the GESTES research found that women's access to land and civic participation often go hand in hand. "The women who led organizations, who were councillors, who were politically active, generally had access to land. That is what makes us say that civic participation should be encouraged."

Enda Pronat is spreading the word to groups working in other regions, encouraging them to deliver the same messages to women: claim your right to land from the rural councils, become councillors, and understand the true tenets of your religion.

A day-long meeting with the Union des Associations d'Élus Locaux served to enlist the aid of local elected officials in this awareness-raising campaign. Their collaboration has led to greater participation of women on three rural councils. In Diender, for example, the number of women on the 30-member council has increased from three to 11. And already they have succeeded in helping several women obtain official land assignments.

Enda Pronat has also joined forces with rural radio stations to disseminate information in local languages. A series of radio programs has helped to publicize the research results, and to give women farmers a voice.

"It has allowed us to raise the debate," says Diop Sall. "When there is a problem in a community, people immediately turn to the local radio station." A consensus has not been reached, but people are now aware of the issue, she says.

In 2004, the Loi d'Orientation Agro Sylvio Pastorale sought to promote more intensive, diversified, and sustainable agricultural production systems on family farms. This, however, requires substantial land reforms that, researchers say, have yet to be completed.

"But I think we will see a true reform after the 2012 elections," says Diop Sall. "And I think our findings will contribute to that because they are known by members of the General Assembly, the Senate, just about everywhere. Our study is cited whenever there's a project or activity on this topic."

But, she adds, this reform will need to be participatory. "If it includes local people — chiefs, religious leaders, and others — to implement the reform, things will change. This approach is needed to implement the laws because then everyone will realize that it's in women's best interests, in men's best interests, in families' best interests — everyone's. When there is a consensus, we can achieve equity in land access that respects everyone's rights."

This case study was written by Louise Guénette of IDRC's Communications Division.

The views expressed in this case study are those of IDRC-funded researchers and experts in the field.

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This case study is one of five presented on the Women and Land in_focus website.