

Secure land, secure futures

The gender gap in displacement contexts in Mali

Photo: © Assiatou Traore/NRC Mali

Land rights and displacement in Mali

In the northern and central regions of Mali, violence and displacement have led to widespread loss of farmland, livestock, and cultivated fields, alongside the destruction of property, secondary occupation of land, community land disputes, and forced evictions.¹ At the same time, climate change is intensifying droughts and floods, putting additional pressure on land, worsening food insecurity and displacement, and increasing the vulnerability of already displaced communities.² IOM surveys reveal that 41 % of displaced households are living with host families. Furthermore 11 % reside in rented accommodation while 18% report having sold their homes or land in order to survive.³ This land insecurity has serious consequences, particularly given that agriculture and livestock farming remain the primary means of subsistence in areas affected by population displacement.

Tenure insecurity for displaced women

Women are particularly disadvantaged. Deeply entrenched discriminatory customary practices prevent them from accessing, owning or inheriting land. According to the World Bank, only **8% of adult women (age 15 and over)** own at least one parcel of land.⁴ For **housing ownership**, where names are listed on dwelling titles, women account for **only 21%** of listed owners.⁵

NRC's field experience shows that displaced women often face multiple barriers to accessing land, and as a result, the majority lack any form of land tenure documentation and are largely reliant on informal arrangements such as staying with host families or renting land. Discriminatory customary practices further prevent women - especially displaced widows and single women, and youth - from owning, controlling and inheriting land.⁶ Displaced

¹ UN [Mali | Global Humanitarian Overview 2026 | Humanitarian Action](#)

² [Severe Floods Hitting Most Vulnerable in Sahel and Lake Chad Region](#), NRC 2024

³ [Mali HNRP 2025](#)

⁴ **39 % of adult men (age 15+)** in Mali own at least one parcel of land. World Bank, [Many steps forward, yet some way to go – improving gender statistics in Mali](#), World Bank 2023

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NRC, [Land to Live On: The Struggle of Displaced Women in Mali](#), NRC 2024

women are often poorly informed about land allocation procedures and rarely included in decision-making bodies. The lack of tailored financing further exacerbates productivity gaps and reinforces their marginalization. Displaced women often can only rent small plots informally, with no guarantee of long-term access, limiting their ability to invest in or expand agricultural production and deepening economic vulnerability.⁷ This, in turn, increases their dependence on humanitarian aid and heightens the risks of exploitation and abuse as illustrated in Mariam’s story below:

A new life in Koro – the story of Mariam

When insecurity worsened in Burkina Faso, Mariam, a 62-year-old widow and head of household with eight children, fled to Koro.

She rented a small house for 12,500 FCFA per month (USD 22 per month), but like many Burkinabe refugees in Koro and Bankass, she struggled with poor-quality housing and an irregular income. Without a lease agreement, she was afraid of eviction.

To support her, NRC implemented an integrated approach combining legal assistance and shelter rehabilitation. The Information Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) team facilitated meetings with the landlord, explaining the program and advocating for a written lease agreement. This protected Mariam from eviction, disputes, or scams, while assuring the landlord about the improvements to the property. Rehabilitation costs were provided in exchange for a rent-free period of 16 months, giving Mariam time to stabilize her income. With NRC’s guidance, Mariam successfully negotiated a legal contract, and the rent-free period allowed her to save and get on her feet.

Today, Mariam says with a big smile: *“I finally feel safe in my home and can focus on my children and my small business.”*

Land governance: legal pluralism for women’s land rights

In Mali, **statutory, customary and religious laws and structures continue to operate alongside each other, creating a system of legal pluralism and often resulting in legal ambiguities.** The 1992 Constitution,⁸ the Land Code and other laws strongly support women’s rights to land and related benefits. Equal access to land for men and women is guaranteed under family law in matters of marriage, inheritance and divorce.⁹ The Agricultural Orientation Law¹⁰ and its accompanying decrees¹¹ require State and customary authorities to allocate at least 15% of land in areas designated for development to women and youth association, including those led by displaced persons. The Land Policy¹² and the Law relating

⁷ NRC, [Dignity in Displacement: Mariam’s Journey to a Safe Shelter](#), NRC 2025

⁸ Art.2 1992 Constitution states that every Malian “*shall be free and equal in rights and obligations,*” and prohibits discrimination based on sex.

⁹ [Mali Family Code](#)

¹⁰ Article 13, [Loi N°2017- 001 du 11 Avril 2017 portant sur le foncier agricole](#). Loi d’Orientation Agricole (LOA)

¹¹ 4 April 2018 [Décret n°2018-0334/P-RM du 04 avril 2018 fixant les modalités d’organisation et de fonctionnement de l’Observatoire National du Foncier Agricole.](#)

¹² [Politique Foncière Agricole \(PFA\)](#)

to Agricultural Land¹³ also contain strong provisions supporting women's rights to land and ensuring equitable access.

However, the effectiveness of these statutory provisions is limited, as these challenges are compounded by weak implementation of legally mandated quotas, ongoing legal ambiguities, and poor coordination among land institutions creating a persistent gap between policy commitments and realities on the ground.

Customary land rights, recognized by the *1986 Code Domanial et Foncier*,¹⁴ have governed land management in Mali for centuries. These systems are patriarchal and patrilineal, largely excluding women and youth from land rights despite their central role in agriculture, leaving many without secure tenure.

Overview of NRC ICLA Programme efforts to enhance displaced women access to land

Improving women's rights to land is possible. Since 2014, the ICLA programme has enabled displacement-affected people — with a strong focus on women — in Mali to secure their housing, land, and property (HLP) rights. The ICLA programme is currently present in Gao, Tombouctou, Mopti (Douentza and Bandiagara) and Ménaka. The ICLA team empowers IDPs, refugees, returnees, and members of host communities to claim and exercise their rights by:

- 1) Empowering displacement affected populations to understand and exercise their HLP rights;
- 2) Addressing barriers that limit women's enjoyment of HLP rights;
- 3) Strengthening the capacity and skills of land actors to resolve land disputes; and,
- 4) Building the capacity of national and local authorities in land governance.

To achieve this, the ICLA programme uses a two-pronged approach of legal empowerment and **capacity strengthening to promote inclusivity**, with a particular focus on advancing women's access to land.

Legal empowerment for displaced individuals is the process of equipping them with the knowledge and skills, through NRC legal services, to understand, claim, and exercise their rights under national laws and regulations, enabling meaningful participation in statutory and customary processes affecting their lives. Between 2021 and 2025, the ICLA programme assisted a total of 34,037 individuals (51 % female, 49 % male). Of these, over 9,400 individuals (56 % female, 44 % male) received legal awareness services specifically designed to enhance women's understanding of HLP rights and 11,200 individuals (49 % female, 51 % male) benefited from legal counselling. Over 11,700 individuals (52 % female, 48 % male) received legal assistance including mediation and negotiation services, to resolve land and property disputes and to secure required documentation.¹⁵ NRC carries out mobile legal clinics that provide individual legal assistance in hard-to-reach areas. Across all these activities, particular attention is given to supporting women in claiming and securing their land rights in line with the Government's *Guide de Procédure d'Accès des Groupements de Femmes et de*

¹³ [Loi Portant Foncière Agricole \(LFA\)](#)

¹⁴ [1986 Code Domanial et Foncier \(CDF\)](#)

¹⁵ NRC, [Restoring Peaceful Relations Between Farmers and Herders in Mali](#), NRC 2025

*Jeunes aux Terres Agricoles Aménagées de l'État et des Collectivités Territoriales.*¹⁶ The case study below illustrates this approach:

Case Study: Land Security Empowers a Women's Cooperative

In the Bokiât neighbourhood of Timbuktu, a cooperative of women and youth came together to cultivate a small market garden to improve their livelihoods. The cooperative used a two-hectare site that provided an important opportunity to grow vegetables, generate income, and support their families.

However, despite their hard work, the group faced a major challenge: they had no formal document confirming their right to use the land. Without proof of land use, the cooperative members lived with the constant fear of disputes or eviction, which could jeopardize their efforts. To address this challenge, NRC's ICLA team assisted the cooperative in securing formal recognition of their land use. With guidance from NRC, the group obtained a donation certificate issued by the Bokiât neighbourhood chief. The document provides locally recognized proof that the cooperative has the right to cultivate and use the two-hectare site.

The intervention directly benefited around 100 women members of the cooperative, the majority of whom are displaced, helping them gain safer access to land and continue their agricultural activities with greater confidence. By securing their right to use the land, the certificate also reduced the risk of land disputes, eviction and land grabbing. Fatoumata, a 36-year-old cooperative member, explained how the donation certificate brought them security: ***"Today we feel protected against the risk of land grabbing and disputes. This document gives us the confidence to continue cultivating our market garden,"*** she said.

The certificate has allowed the cooperative to continue farming with greater peace of mind and to invest more confidently in their agricultural activities. For many women in the group, the garden has become an important source of income, supporting their households and improving their living conditions.



Presentation of a donation certificate securing land rights for a women's group in Timbuktu. Photo: Gaoussou Haidara/NRC

To build a conducive environment, NRC provides **capacity building support** to government agencies and community leaders, and advocates for policy reform and the protection of women's rights. Between 2021 and 2025, the programme trained 1,609 statutory and customary authorities (31 % female, 69 % male) on HLP rights including members of the *Commissions Foncières* (Land Commissions), district, village, and site chiefs, religious leaders, and other officials. The *Commissions Foncières*

¹⁶ NRC, International Rescue Committee, and Government of Mali, *Guide de Procédure d'Accès des Groupements de Femmes et de Jeunes aux Terres Agricoles Aménagées de l'État et des Collectivités Territoriales*, NRC 2024.

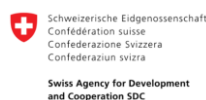
serve as a key mechanism for promoting **women's access to land via customary law, helping to formalize land rights, and resolving land disputes.**¹⁷

Through both legal empowerment and capacity-strengthening efforts, the programme systematically integrates women's land rights into all activities, ensuring that interventions across individual assistance, counselling, and institutional training reinforce women's ability to access and secure land. The programme includes training on relevant laws, as well as mediation and negotiation skills, which are essential for resolving land disputes, preventing conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence.



NRC support on access to land and security are restoring hope to Fatoumata and several other displaced women working on a market garden plot in central Mali. Photo: Ousmane Drabo/NRC

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¹⁷ Fatoumata Sissoko and Bitibali Monique Dougnon,

[Sécurisation foncière et inclusion sociale des groupes vulnérables en milieu rural](#) Land at Scale, 2023

¹⁸ The views expressed and information presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the position of NRC's donors.