



Dynamics of Women's Access Conditions to Agricultural Land among the Yacouba of Danané

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Abstract

Land and gender are two natural elements that have important cultural dimensions in many societies, especially in Africa. The Yacouba of Danané (western Côte d'Ivoire), in their tradition, except in exceptional cases, do not favor inheritance or ownership of agricultural land by women. With the politico-military crisis that Côte d'Ivoire experienced between 2002 and 2011, during which Danané was besieged by the rebels, it was to be feared that the land situation of yacouba women in this locality would worsen. However, there is an improvement in their land conditions. By focusing on the changes in land practices underway in the Yacouba tradition of Danané, this study aims to identify the determinants of dynamics of Yacouba women's access conditions to agricultural land in Danané. To do this, focus groups with presidents of women farmers' associations, individual interviews with customary chiefs, agents of women's support structures and women farmers were carried out and transcribed. The thematic analysis of the content of these transcripts reveals the role played by NGOs and other human rights defense structures in Danané during the military-political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire and the impact of the action of these organizations as factors of this dynamic. However, there are still socio-land issues faced specifically by Yacouba women in Danané that prevent them from fully exercising their land rights.

Keywords: *Women; Agricultural Land; Land Rights; Danané; Yacouba; Ngos*

Introduction

The Ivorian economy is intensely dependent on agriculture. This makes access to agricultural land resources in Côte d'Ivoire a strategic issue, but above all an object of struggle between industrialists and family farmers, between natives and foreigners, between elders and cadets, between men and women... and also within these groups of actors. In this country, the application of the law on the rural land code passed in 1998, which has been amended many times, is stalled (Goulin & al. 2018). Indeed, it has not yet been fully implemented, leaving a wide scope for practices that mix customary law, positive

law and the inventions of actors (receipts for transfers of land rights, village attestation, stamps and signatures of administrative authorities).

While women are the main producers of food crops, valuable helpers in their families' perennial crop plantations and workers in industrial plantations, making them key agricultural actors, their access to land in Côte d'Ivoire, as in many African countries, remains problematic (Budlender & Eileen, 2011; Gadiaga, 2018; Koné & Ibo, 2009; Mukasa, Reynier and Ogunsumi, 2019; Wague, 2020). In fact, there are still socio-cultural constraints that manifest themselves in the restrictions and precariousness of their access to land resources in the customary systems of several peoples.

Among the Yacouba of Danané, several practices were observed with regard to women's access to land on the traditional basis of *Débô pba blouh yaa læu* which literally translates as "the woman has no bush". However, it was possible to give her a space where she could "look for her food". Thus, as a single or divorced woman (in her biological family) or as a married woman (in her matrimonial family), she could benefit, if she so wished, from a piece of land to cultivate for her subsistence and possibly that of her children, without owning it in the strict sense of the term. Nevertheless, although rare, inter vivos transmissions of plots of land from male relatives (father, uncle, brother, cousin, etc.) to women were observed. Women could also inherit from their fathers or husbands, with or without disputes and expropriations. The rarity of these cases shows that they were exceptions that confirmed the general rule of discrimination against women in matters of land resources among these Yacouba.

This situation persisted until Danané came under the control of rebel armed groups during the politico-military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, which lasted from 2002 to 2011. As is the case in the territories under rebel control, this led to a halt in the functioning of the public administration, the exile of part of the population, the arrival of NGOs and a strong military presence. Looting, rapes, assassinations, kidnappings, disappearances, the dislocation of families, school dropouts, the abandonment of farmland and plantations, fighting with periods of calm, etc., were among the corollaries of this political and military crisis. In addition, Danané, like the other departments in the mountainous west of Côte d'Ivoire, has seen an influx of Ivorians from the north, Burkina Faso and Malians who are attacking the forest land for the production of cocoa trees.

However, a little more than a decade after the end of the war, while the ethnocultural restrictions on women's access to land and the effects of the war could have led to fears that women's vulnerability to land tenure would increase in Danané, changes in the direction of improving women's land rights have been observed instead. The present study therefore focused on this dynamic of the local land tenure system, with an emphasis on identifying the determinants of the improvement of women's access to agricultural land resources among the Yacouba of Danané.

Geographical, Political and Humanitarian Context of the Study

Danané is an exclusively Yacouba territory and a department covering 3,288 km² in the Tonkpi region, in the far west of Côte d'Ivoire. Along with the Yacouba, other Ivorian populations and non-Ivorians live in the area, mainly from Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana...

The capital of this department is the town of Danané, located about 630 km from Abidjan. The department of Danané is bordered by the departments of Zouan-Hounien and Bangolo to the south, the departments of Man and Biankouma to the east, the department of Sipilou as well as Guinea to the north and Liberia to the west (Figure 1).

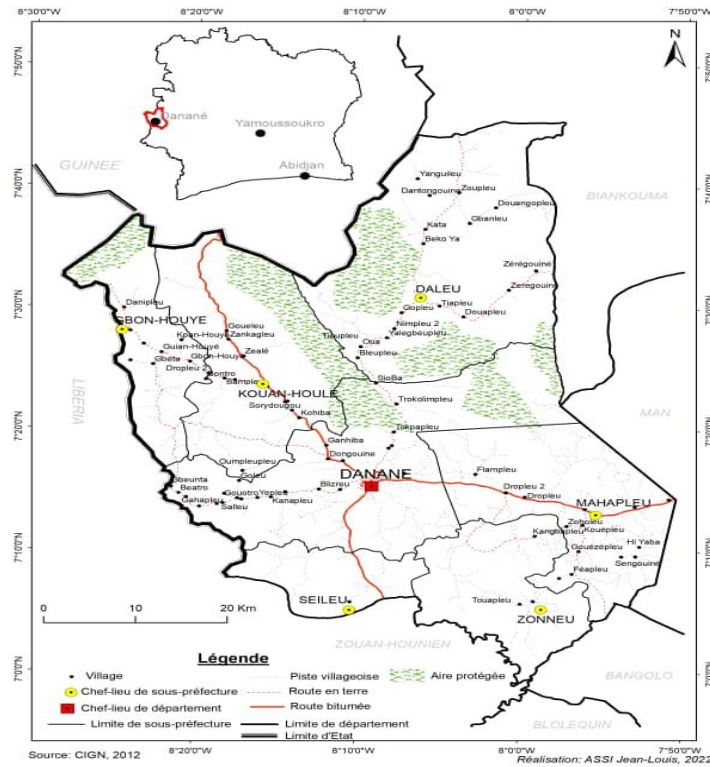


Figure 1 : Geographical location of Danané Department

This department came under the control of armed rebel groups (MPIGO, MJP and MPC) on 28 November 2002. Several international NGOs subsequently flocked to the department to offer assistance to the population in the areas of health, food, legal, etc. These NGOs were of considerable help to the population in this area, which was outside government control. These NGOs were of considerable help to the population in this area, which was beyond government control and where all types of abuse and violence were now possible without the perpetrators being identified and/or worried. Thus, during the crisis period (2003 to 2011) and afterwards, NGOs and other human rights structures were able to create a dynamic. Some of these NGOs (Red Cross, UNHCR, Caritas, etc.) were already providing assistance to Liberian refugees who had fled the war in their country.

Methods

This study followed a qualitative approach. Two (2) focus groups, one with 6 presidents of women's associations and another with 9 individuals, including 5 women farmers and 4 traditional chiefs, were conducted. Individual interviews were conducted with 4 women who were co-heirs of land with men, 2 co-heirs with women, 5 widows, 6 women who own perennial crop plantations (cocoa and rubber trees), 5 women who rent land, 1 woman lawyer, 1 social centre worker, 1 former international NGO field officer, 1 NGO field officer, 5 women farmers who are not members of associations.

All these interviews were transcribed in full and were subject to a thematic content analysis. The codes selected are : Tradition of the Yacouba of Danané in terms of land tenure ; Modes of access to land by women ; Difficulties encountered by women today and Changes in the land tenure system.

Results

It appears that until the political-military crisis, land tenure practices in agricultural matters were essentially based on tradition. With the war context, NGOs focused their actions on the respect of human rights. In particular, the most vulnerable, women and children, were at the heart of the actions of the humanitarians present in Danané throughout the crisis period. Thus, the role played by these humanitarians has had an impact on land tenure practices. Women continue to face difficulties that prevent them from fully exercising their land rights.

Role played by NGOs and Other Human Rights Structures in Danané During the Politico-Military Crisis in Côte D'ivoire

The intervention of NGOs and other human rights structures was strategically done in several phases in rebel-controlled areas such as Danané. Indeed, when fighting between government and rebel forces was raging, only those organisations that were not suspected of belonging to the government camp intervened. Thus, several local and international humanitarian agencies (Figure 2), considered at least neutral, were able to intervene in Danané at first.

Names	Start date of activities	Fields of activity	Local NGO partner (relay)
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)	2003	Health, HIV: setting up a CHT Centre for HIV testing	
World Food Program	2002	Emergency food distribution	ONG Siloé, ONG PAHO
CARE International	2003	Social Cohesion and HIV Health	NGO Coordination CONGEDA
Save the children	2003	Child protection, CSO training, school rehabilitation, HIV health	ONG Siloé
International Rescue Committee IRC	2005	Protection, health, social cohesion	ONG Siloé
ICRC	2005	Food distribution, Protection, Health	Organisation des personnes handicapées
DRC	2007	Protection of women	CONGEDA, ONG Siloé, ONG PAHO
NRC	2010	Child protection, vocational training for teenagers aged 15 to 24	ONG Siloé
UNFPA	2009	HIV health, rehabilitation of health and social services	CONGEDA, ONG Siloé Danané General and other Hospitals
UNITED NATIONS OPERATION IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE	2004	Financing of income Generating Activities for Women Youth and other vulnerable people	Refugees
UNICEF	2003	Child protection, food distribution in schools and among the vulnerable people	ONG PAHO
UN WOMEN	2011	Financing small projects for refugee women	City Hall and CONGEDA

Figure 2. List of some of the humanitarian organisations that intervened in Danané during the politico-military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire

Source : Coordination of activities of NGOs operating in the department of Danané and Zouan-Hounien (CONGEDA), 2022

The areas of intervention of these structures were health, food, civil protection, training, the economy, social cohesion, etc. Their interventions consisted primarily of actions relating to the right to life with a focus on health, social protection, food, etc. Their interventions consisted first of all of actions relating to the right to life with an emphasis on health, social protection, food, etc. During this phase, the combatants and, above all, the civilian populations in place benefited from health, food and legal assistance from NGOs. At the same time, the latter raised awareness of human rights among civilians and combatants:

NGO activities really started in 2003-04. They intervened in the areas of health, social protection, washing (water and sanitation) and economic recovery. They started with awareness raising on

human rights issues because there were weapons in circulation in Danané. It was a question of getting the rebels not to use their weapons against civilians and to allow them to benefit from care. Specific actions for the protection of women began in 2006-7: everything from gender-based violence to awareness raising and assistance. (Humanitarian agent working in Danané during the politico-military crisis).

Thus, the fundamental rights to life, health, a healthy environment, food, a decent income, etc. were at the heart of the NGOs' action. However, it was during the period of calm that preceded and followed the return of part of the public administration to rebel-controlled areas that NGOs subsequently focused on the equal rights of men and women. During this phase, national and international laws on gender equality were revealed:

The woman has the right to her family's land. That is the way it is now. It is *human rights* that have saved us. In Côte d'Ivoire, we don't know when it came, but in Danané, it was when the war started to calm down that human rights came here. But before that, we didn't know that if there is war in a country, there are people's rights that must be protected. Côte d'Ivoire did not speak up quickly, it was in secret. It's like that, (the human rights NGOs) called all the chiefs here, we the presidents of the neighbourhood associations, we say now there is a right. You are married, you have a small right in the family too, the one who is not married, who stays in the family, she has a right. (President of a women farmers' association).

The most common means of introducing and raising awareness of women's and children's rights are manuscripts. These are documents that these NGOs have been involved in writing, editing or publishing (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Cover pages of some of the documents used by NGOs to raise awareness of women's rights in Danané

Source : Goulin, 2021

During this period, new agreements between the government and the rebels led to a lull that allowed structures such as the social centre to function again, with the return of its staff. These structures collaborated on social issues with those they found in place. And the intervention of all these structures consisted of encouraging women to form associations, encouraging women to denounce the abuses of which they are victims, accompanying women in the defence of their rights:

A woman came to me. Her cousin wanted to take away a piece of land in production that her uncle, her cousin's father, had given her while he was alive. I asked her to go to the dispute management committee in her village first. She told me that the person in charge of the committee was not in the village and that the others intervened but her cousin would not listen to reason. I referred her case to the social centre. The social centre tried to reconcile them but the woman did not agree with the solution proposed by the social worker. So the social worker asked them to come to an agreement but her cousin didn't answer the summonses. The woman came back to see me, I told her to go and see the "Femmes juristes (women lawyers)". They helped her to keep her plot. (Humanitarian agent working in Danané during the politico-military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire).

Instruction on equal rights for men and women and assistance to women in defending their rights have helped to challenge their traditional land status. Although equal access to land has not been the main objective. All these actions by NGOs and other human rights structures have had an impact on women's land conditions in Danané.

Impacts of NGOs and Other Human Rights Structures on Land Tenure Practices in Danané

The interventions of NGOs and other human rights structures during the period of the political-military crisis had several impacts on the general population in Danané. The training of paralegals in the communities makes it possible to have focal points who constitute the first link in the chain of defence of women's rights :

I can say that in the Tonkpi region, it is the clinique juridique (legal clinic) alone that accompanies people through the legal process. However, in the community, there are paralegals who have been trained by other structures. They are people recruited from the community who have been given the basic legal training (Head of the legal clinic in the Tonkpi region) ;

When we trained women, we did not involve men. It was when it came to training relay groups in the villages that we involved men who belong to the villages. (Humanitarian agent working in Danané during the politico-military crisis).

However, one manifestation of these impacts is the activism of women in Danané. The last ten years or more have been marked by the massive orientation of Yacouba women towards self-employment in agriculture and the creation of organisations and groups in Danané (Figure 4). The women's organisations and groups are working to capitalise on their achievements and defend their rights.



Figure 4: Seats of women's organisations in Danané

Source : Goulin, 2021

The change in mentality and behaviour with regard to equal rights that is taking place in the Yacouba society of Danané produces a land tenure context that is secure or not for both men and women.

The procedures for acquiring land in monetary terms are almost gender-neutral. This makes women are now more actively involved in these monetised land transactions, which used to be the preserve of men. Today, they have the same access to the land market as men. They have plantations in associations and it is possible to count in Danané more than a hundred women farmers' associations grouped in an umbrella organization : "*Our umbrella organization brings together 200 women's associations. One association can be composed of 40 people.*"(President of women's umbrella organization in Danané).

There are also individual initiatives. And at present, several women claim to be "owners" of land and/or plantations that they have bought:

I am the owner of a rubber tree field. I bought the plot of land to grow rubber trees since 2012. I am now "bleeding" my rubber tree and I will make my first sale on 15 February 2022. (President of a women's association in Danané).

In addition, the traditional requirement to be accompanied by a male guarantor when applying for (borrowing, buying, pledging, etc.) land is no longer in force. Women are now accompanied, if at all, by men only as witnesses to the land transactions in which they participate. At present, the methods by which women gain access to land in Danané are inheritance, tenancy, purchase and pledge. The crops they grow depend on the mode of access and whether they are alone or in association (Figure 5.).

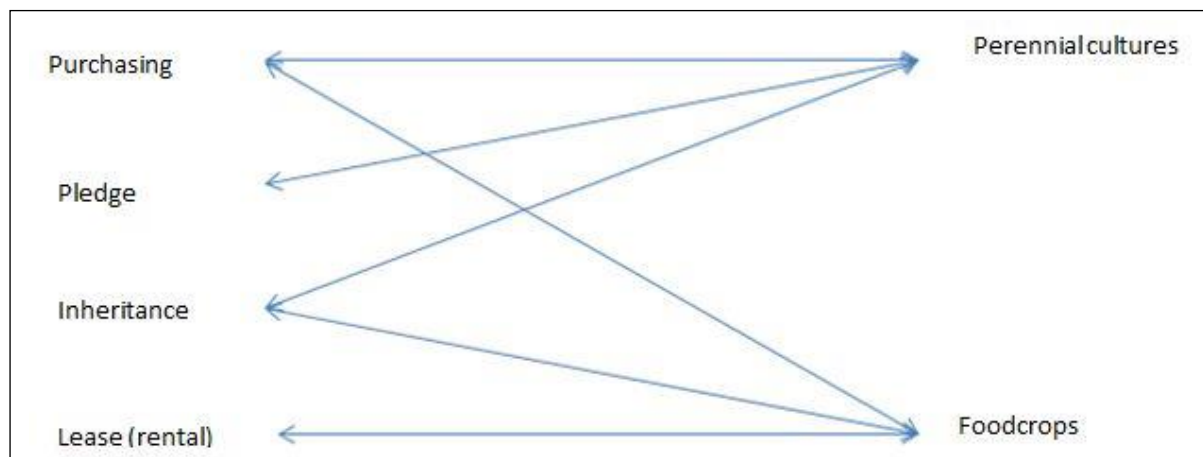


Figure 5: Crops grown by women according to their access to land

Source : Goulin, 2021

In associations, women opt exclusively for fermage (annual rental of land) and only cultivate crops whose production does not exceed two years (vegetables, legumes, cassava, maize, banana, etc.). Individually, they may also be forced to farm. Women, especially those with financial means, sometimes gain access to land by lending money as a guarantee for planting, generally coffee or cocoa trees. Apart from this case, women only agree to grow perennial crops on their own plots of land acquired by inheritance or purchase, and not subject to any dispute :

On rented land, you can't grow perennial crops, the land is bought directly to do so. You can't rent land and put rubber trees on it for 7 or even 12 years, it's not possible. Yacouba farmer in Danané (president of a women farmers' association) ;

There are women who have individual rubber, palm and cocoa fields. But these are bushes that they have bought with people (Member of a women farmers' association in Danané).

In biological or matrimonial families (in the event of the death of the husband), the complex (under the pretext of tradition) of women to claim and defend their right to land is gradually fading. Those who are keen on inheritance are increasingly claiming or defending their share from their co-heirs in their biological families and from the parents of their deceased husband in their matrimonial families. Women claim that local traditional land authorities now rule in their favour when they have a legitimate claim to land in different family contexts. When these bodies have difficulty enforcing their decisions, women no longer hesitate to seek the assistance of the courts, the social services centre, the gendarmerie, the police or the legal clinic when they are aware of their ability to help them :

It's been two years since my husband died. My husband's brothers said that I didn't have children with him, so they took everything in our house. The first year, they were the ones who ran our plantations. So when we had the funeral and the mourning, the relatives in the village said that his brothers had done wrong. And that it was our couple, my husband and I, who worked so they had nothing to do with it. So they gave me back my fields and I have them all now. The parents asked them not to even bother with the fact that I had put some of the fields in "boussan". (Yacouba farmer in Danané) ;

I have some bush in Bounta. It's a family bush that I was given my share of. My brothers left their mother's place and came to work in the one that belonged to my mother, which now belongs to me. And when I talk, they resist me. So I have spoken to the elders of the family who are in town. But when they call them, they don't come. So I took information and went to summon them to court. The case went to court. So our head of the family in Abidjan felt that they were going in the wrong direction and that they should apologise to me. He told them that if the case stays in court, it will turn against them. (Yacouba farmer in Danané).

The social services, the public prosecutor's office, the hospital, the gendarmerie, the police, NGOs, civil society organisations, etc., all work together to coordinate responses to gender-based violence in their area of competence. They are united in a platform within which responses to gender-based violence in their area of competence are coordinated :

There is a very good and frank collaboration between us and the social services. We work in synergy because our main mission is to provide legal information to the population. When we have cases that require mediation for an amicable settlement, we refer these cases to the social services. And the social services also refer cases to us, whether it is the one in Danané or all the social services centres in the Tonkpi region. (Head of the Tonkpi clinique juridique (legal clinic)) ;

We have a multi-sectoral platform to fight gender-based violence, a collaborative platform where all sectors of activity are brought together. The legal clinic is a partner. In terms of activities, we do training at the level of the platform, it is the legal clinic that comes to guide us, especially on the new laws on gender-based violence and others... (Head of the Danané social services).

There appears to be a mobilisation to enable the Yacouba women of Danané to have access to agricultural land in the same way as men. In this respect, women are suffering less and less abuse because of their gender. However, although the acceptance and materialisation of this access is increasingly perceptible, the land problems they have to face exist or persist

Socio-Land Issues Encountered Specifically by Women in Danané

The change in land tenure practices that was introduced in the wake of the human rights awareness campaign during the politico-military crisis is not yet effective among all the Yacouba people of Danané. Indeed, some areas and individuals are still resistant to this. In such conditions, awareness-

raising and amicable agreements are favoured to allow women to have access to the agricultural land to which they are supposed to be entitled :

If you raise awareness from the first village to the last village in the Da (Gouroussé), it is only one village that will give a good testimony, and only one testimony, not two. We make pleas to the parents so that the woman has at least a small plot of land from her family, whether she is married or not. (President of a women farmers' association);

More often than not, we seek to avoid justice. Because we have noticed that court decisions are not always respected. It is true that the courts carry out investigations and rule in favour of the rightful claimants, but they have to gain access to the land against a whole village community, which is not easy. So we are in the business of conciliation and reconciliation in terms of our mission because often when we try to conciliate and it produces a good result, it is more lasting (...) In the villages, we bring everyone together and everyone is listened to for two or three days. (Head of the Danané social services).

In the family context, threats to women's land rights and real risks of not exercising them exist. In the biological family, these threats and risks are posed by brothers and other male collateral relatives. The situations mentioned have several configurations. Sometimes land is given by a parent to a woman (or daughter) during his lifetime and is claimed from her after the donor's death. It also happens that brothers lose interest in the land inheritance and do not help their sisters to access their share of the inheritance against other brothers (usually half-brothers) and/or other male collateral relatives. Another situation mentioned is that (half) brothers are interested in the family farmland and refuse to share the land inheritance with their (half) sisters :

My half-brothers had taken over all our land after my father and mother died. I have two brothers, one of whom has died and the other works in town, he doesn't come to the village. When I spoke to him about the case, he said he didn't feel concerned about our land and that I should leave this bush business because I could be eliminated just for that. (Yacouba farmer in Danané).

In the matrimonial family, the bride or divorcee may be denied the use of agricultural land or production to which she is entitled by the (ex) husband. But generally, these threats and risks faced by women, especially widows, are caused by in-laws :

Sometimes when the husband dies, the in-laws take over the couple's land, and the widow is often even driven out with her children. If this woman is unaware of her rights, when these things happen to her, she can only resign herself. (Head of the Tonkpi legal clinic);

I got married in 2013. My husband already had plantations before we got together. And I bought my own land-fields. But when my husband died, his brothers said that these fields belonged to him and that they would get them back. (Yacouba farmer in Danané).

Although women are increasingly involved in agriculture and land, they do not always have the physical, material and financial means to develop their activities. The lack of bank financing means that they turn to potential financiers. The latter are most often politicians. In such cases, the difference in political sensitivities of the members of the farmers' associations or with the funder, creates the risk of division within these associations or refusal of funding by these politicians.

Discussion

The tradition of the Yacouba of Danané restricts women's access to land. This discrimination against women in terms of land is observed among several other peoples in Africa (Budlender & Eileen,

2011 ; Gadiaga, 2015; Grey, Kilawe & Rurangwa, 2014; Mukasaest, Reynierest & Ogunsumi, 2011; Wague, 2020). Notable changes in this arrangement are beginning to be seen in Danané since the passage of international NGOs during the politico-military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, which lasted from 2002 to 2011. In fact, these NGOs and their local partners have based their interventions on human rights and more particularly on the condition of women. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014) mentions an increase in violence against women in situations of conflict and political confrontation. This undoubtedly justifies the special treatment women receive in wartime, as confirmed by the ICRC (2015).

Thus, the instruction of the Yacouba of Danané on national and international laws relating to the equal rights between men and women has enabled a redistribution of the cards in the customary land tenure system. Encouraging the Yacouba women of Danané to organise themselves into groups and empower themselves through various income-generating activities has contributed to the sustainability of the impact of the NGOs' actions. Cases of women's empowerment and especially social change in their favour after armed conflicts, whether or not induced by NGOs, are presented by Eldred (2014), Régimbald (2017) and Ryan (2020). As a result, war sometimes appears to be an empowering factor for women (Thébaud, 2020). Women's demand for agricultural land both within the family and on the market makes agriculture a privileged sector of their empowerment in Danané.

Although Yacouba women in Danané are overwhelmingly turning to agriculture as a means of empowerment, their choice of crops is closely linked to the ways in which they access or at least hold rights to the land to be used. The existence of several ways in which both men and (now) women can access land is evidence of the development of the land market in recent years in Danané. However, the obligation to grow perennial crops only on land that one owns can be interpreted as a low level of land security offered by this market. Whatever the mode of access to the land and its exploitation, there are women who have adopted it. This fact is also noted by Koné & Ibo (2009) who specify that collective fields are a practice initiated by external actors (NGOs, projects), as in Danané. All these changes initiated by NGOs in wartime are accompanied and even reinforced by public and parapublic structures in place in this post-war period.

Even if laws on gender equality in areas such as land tenure are not fully enforced, either because of cultural constraints (Vléi-Yoroba, 1997) or because women are unaware of them, there is increasing attention to the concerns of Yacouba women who seek assistance in cases of abuse in Danané. The synergy between public and parapublic structures to help these women exercise their land rights seems to be a manifestation of the commitment of the Ivorian government and its partners to the women. This commitment began in the early years after independence, was maintained during the politico-military crisis and continues. The involvement of administrative authorities in enabling women to enjoy their land rights is also reported by Koné & Ibo (2009). However, there are oppositions to the idea of equal rights for men and women in parts of Danané. Such disparities or even diachronies in the acquisition of women's rights after the war have already been noted by Thébaud (2020), particularly with regard to the admission of women's right to vote in different European countries.

The acquisition of land rights by women alone is not enough. Other factors of production (labour, seed, fertiliser, technology, etc.) are just as necessary for the full enjoyment of these rights. However, the Yacouba women of Danané do not always have sufficient financial resources to ensure the availability of these factors. This difficulty can lead them to under-exploit the land to which they have access and expose their associations to the desiderata of potential political financiers. Thus, access to (institutional) finance is a major challenge for these women farmers, as Anaadumba & Akinnifesi (2014) have also found elsewhere. However, the AFDB (2015) projects that in Africa, if women farmers are provided with the same guidance and financial means as men farmers, yields would be 20% higher.

Conclusion

The department of Danané is home to the Yacouba people, where women traditionally enjoy far fewer land rights than men. For a little over a decade now, a dynamic has been taking place in Danané with regard to the land tenure conditions of Yacouba women. This dynamic follows the sensitisation of the population to human rights with a particular emphasis on the equal rights between men and women. It is reflected more in the benefit of more land rights and the massive orientation of Yacouba women collectively or individually towards agriculture in Danané. These women also benefit from the support of public and parapublic structures in the defence of their rights. However, resistance in some places to the idea of equal land rights for women and men, as well as the difficulty in accessing institutional funding, are obstacles to the full exercise of their rights. It thus appears that access to land is not enough to empower women Yacouba farmers in Danané.

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