

Chapter 1

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## The role of women in the West African economy

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Chapter 1 highlights the crucial contribution of West African women to the region's food and commercial economy. It demonstrates that these activities are subject to numerous socio-economic and institutional obstacles that limit the participation of women in commercial activities. This chapter analyses these gender inequalities using a relational approach that maps relationships between economic and political actors in social networks. The first case study explores the value chains of the rice trade between Benin, Niger and Nigeria and identifies barriers that limit the participation of women in areas of production and commercialisation. The second case focuses on governance networks and highlights the challenges faced by public policies designed to promote the economic participation of women in the region.

### Key messages

- Women play an important role in the West African food economy. In border regions, they are indispensable actors in the local trade that underpins regional integration.
- Within a network, women producers and retailers are at the periphery of the value chain while the majority of brokers are men.
- Strategies reinforcing women's social capital are thus needed to address their economic marginalisation.
- The governance network in charge of promoting women's economic activities is fragmented.

Women play an important role in the West African food economy. Although there are regional differences in the distribution of agricultural tasks, women are active participants in the cultivation of vegetable, grain, and tuber crops and are frequently involved in harvesting operations. From Dakar to N'Djamena, women participate in the processing and sale of certain agricultural products such as shea, peanuts and cassava that are equally well-suited to production in rural and urban environments. They are involved in a large proportion of sales of vegetables, tubers, fruits, fish and certain grains in the markets in the region. Women perform these functions in addition to the household chores and childcare that remain predominantly feminine responsibilities in West Africa.

The contribution of women represents an average of 40% of the work related to

agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the most recent statistics, this proportion is 37% in Nigeria and 24% in Niger (Palacios-Lopez et al., 2017). This lower overall participation rate for women in West Africa can be partly explained by their higher participation in other segments of the food economy. In West Africa, women make up 80% of employment in the processing, 70% of distribution and almost 90% of sales of ready to consume agricultural products (Allen et al., 2018) (Figure 1.1).

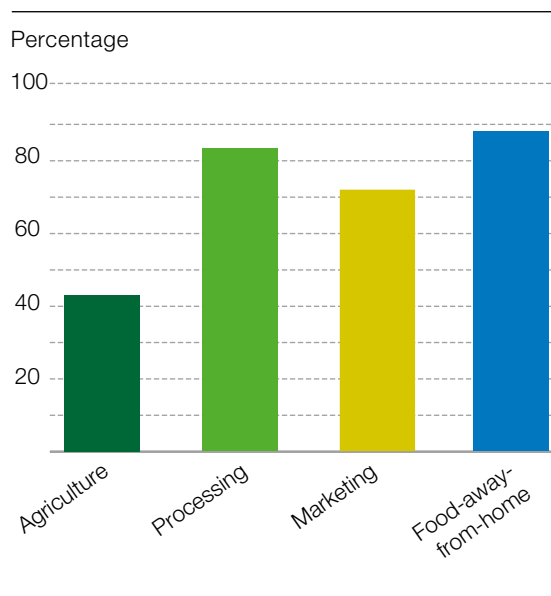
In parallel with activities related to the food economy, West African women also perpetuate a long tradition of short-distance commerce, which deftly exploits regulatory differences between countries in the region. In border regions, in particular, women are important actors in the local trade that underpins processes of regional integration. Between the twin cities

of Gaya and Malanville, for instance, numerous women merchants cross the Niger-Benin border daily, on foot, by canoe and using motor vehicles to distribute their products to neighbouring markets (Walther, 2015). They have also developed commercial networks at the regional scale that link zones of production to large consumer markets. After the Nana-Benz of Lomé, enriched by the textile trade of the 1980s, a new generation of business women have emerged that have links to suppliers in the Middle East and South-east Asia (Sylvanus, 2013).

These activities that are crucial to West African economic growth, however, still face numerous obstacles that limit the participation of women in commercial exchange (WFP, 2016–17; 2016). The relegation of many women to activities that are, generally, less lucrative, riskier and that face greater uncertainty, create gender inequalities that hinder women, in particular, and more generally affect West African development (World Bank, 2012; Ferrant and Kolev, 2016).

Figure 1.1

Share of women's employment by sector in West Africa



Source: Allen et al. 2018

## WHAT TYPES OF OBSTACLES LIMIT THE ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN?

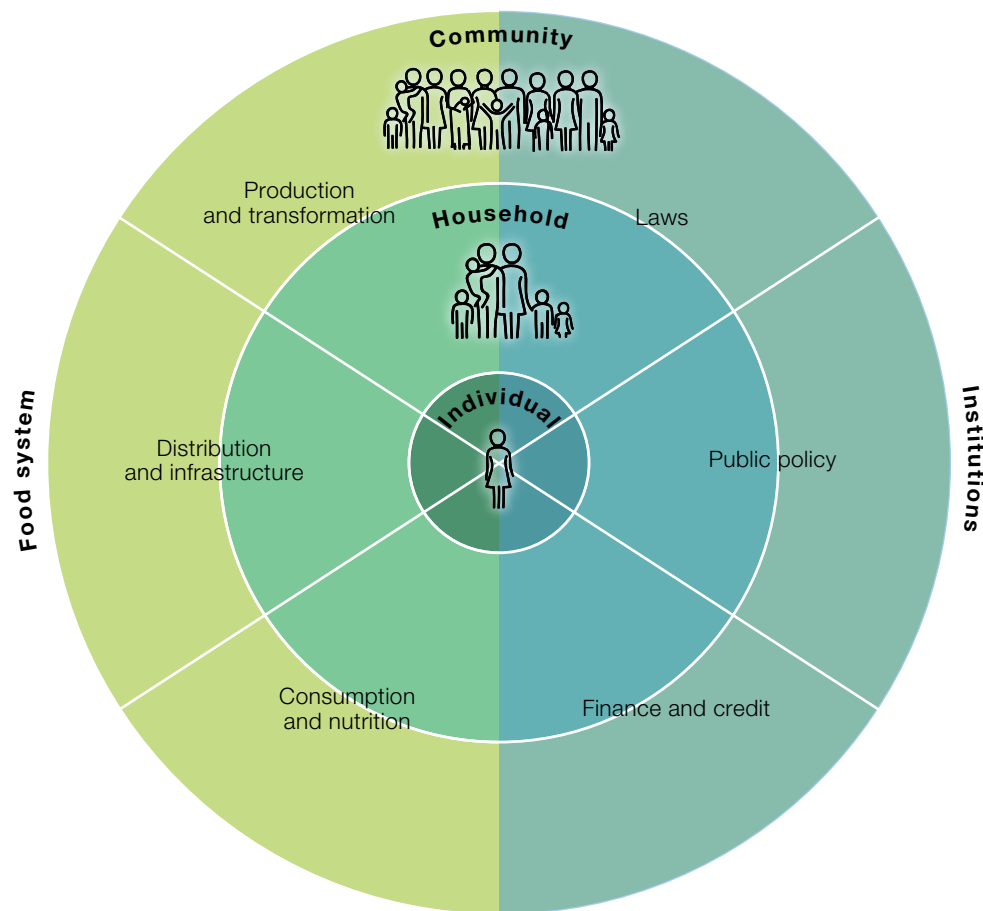
By engaging in an innovative study of women's commercial networks in West Africa, this report analyses the socio-economic obstacles that limit opportunities for women to participate in the food economy (Figure 1.2). These obstacles exist both in agricultural production as well as in processing, distribution and consumption activities. In many regions, certain social norms define the activities that women are eligible to participate in at the village scale and limit their ability to frequent public places where they could engage in commercial activities. Women also face numerous barriers to mobility and are often forced to walk long distances to reach markets because they lack access to motor vehicles and are frequently subject to harassment at borders.

Certain institutional barriers limit the economic activity of West African women. These obstacles include formal and customary laws, public policies and access to financial institutions. These have major repercussions for women's capacity to access agricultural

property and sufficient financial resources to develop their commercial activities. In many societies, women inherit less than men or are encouraged to renounce their financial rights in favour of their spouse (Bouchama et al., 2018) (Figure 1.3). Women's rights to marriage and divorce, where they exist legally, are often subverted by custom and is another area of inequality between the sexes. As a result, the women that do marry and have children early are less educated (OECD, 2014). Women are rarely represented in the political sphere, on land commissions, tribunals or in tribal leadership, which constitutes another barrier to the implementation of public policies aimed at women producers and merchants in the region.

The socio-economic and institutional obstacles encountered by women are likely to limit their commercial participation on three levels (Figure 1.2). At the individual level, women in West Africa are affected by inequalities that limit their professional prospects. The age of marriage of women, their level of education,

Figure 1.2  
Factors that limit the participation of women in commercial activities



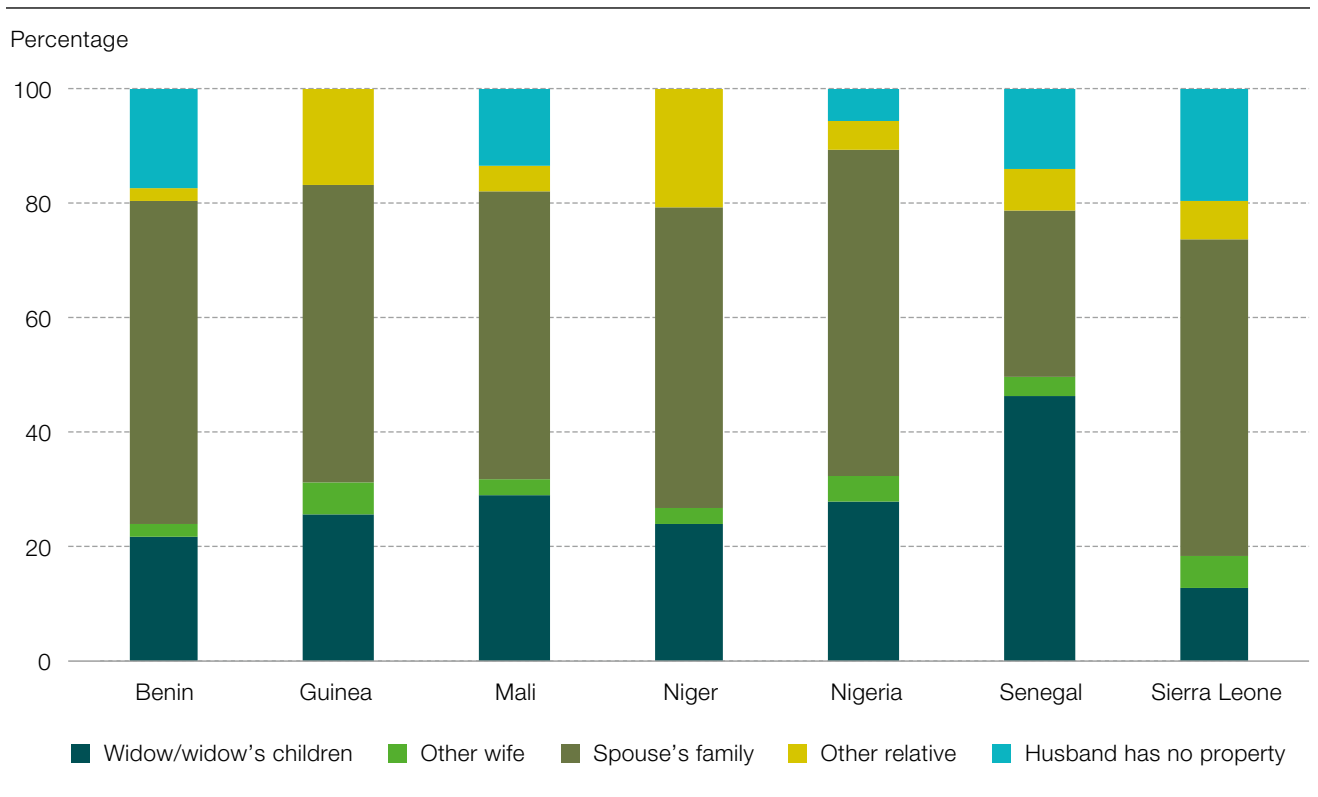
Source: Adapted from Hoffmann et al. 2017

their access to care and their political representation all tend to be lower than that of men. These inequalities have important impacts on the economic activity of women as a result of the growing demand for professional skills in areas of production and commerce. Similarly, inequalities exist between women in men in each household to the extent that each spouse has different influence over household spending where savings and care of children are the highest priorities. Ultimately, gender inequalities are reproduced at the community level where the interests of women conflict with village norms or customary rights.

These gender inequalities are social constructs rather than attributes of birth. They are based on a collection of relations of dependence, of power and solidarity codified by each society in the form of social norms,

customary practices and formal laws. The social position of women within these social networks determines in large part their degree of autonomy with respect to men and, ultimately, the success of their commercial undertakings. If women play a peripheral role in agricultural value chains, it is difficult for them to realise equal benefits as men because they don't have access to the central positions that generate the most wealth. In other words, it is the relationships that exist between men and women in their homes and communities that are the direct causes of the gender inequalities observed in West Africa in the domains of agricultural production and commerce. It is, therefore, essential to better understand how women are linked with other actors in production and distribution networks in order to implement public policies that reduce their marginalisation.

Figure 1.3  
Who inherits the majority of goods in West Africa?



Source: Bouchama et al. 2018

## A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The factors that limit women's access to markets are investigated using a methodology called social network analysis or SNA, which allows researchers to map relationships between social actors in a specific sector or region. This approach can help identify actors and power relations that might not always be revealed by traditional research methods but that, nonetheless, influence the socio-economic success of individuals and constrain the effectiveness of public policies. While this approach has long been used in the study of Western societies, SNA has gained popularity in the scientific community and amongst policy makers since the beginning of the 2010s (OECD/SWAC, 2017; Walther and Renk, 2017).

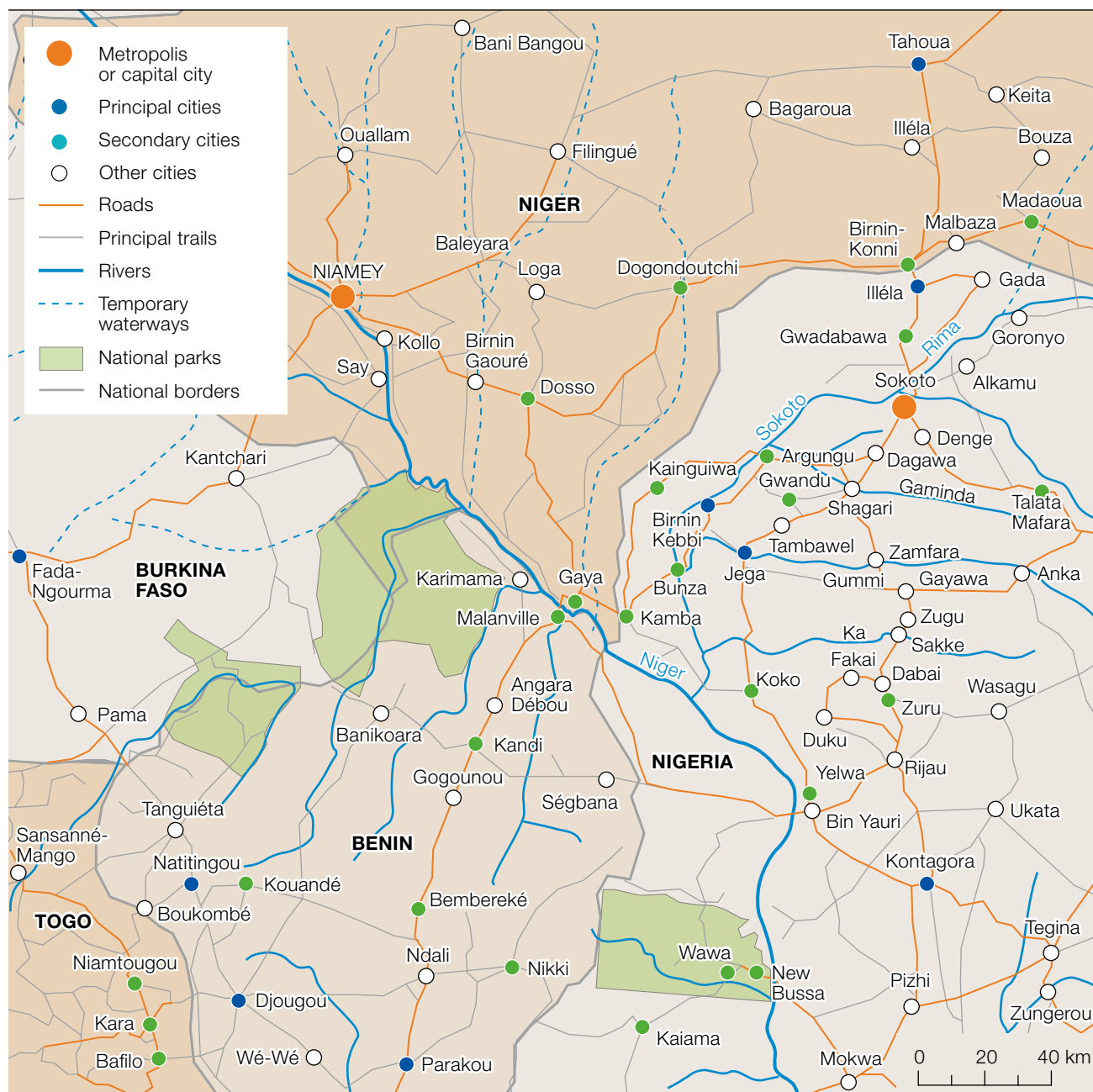
Two studies analyse the structure of social networks within which women play a particularly central role in Western Africa. Their results aim to help craft public policies better suited to the constraints and structural

opportunities that women face in engaging in economic activities. These local and regional studies are unprecedented in their relational approach, which has been rarely applied to questions of gender and development strategies in West Africa. Each study addresses a domain that could legitimately promote the participation of women in commercial exchange: the food system and regional governance.

- The first study focuses on the productive and commercial activities of West African women. It maps business relationships between producers, intermediaries and retailers along the entire value chain of local rice, a sector within which women are particularly active. This research was conducted in a portion of the Niger River valley called the Dendi, a region where the Nigerian demand stimulated by the urbanisation of the continent and changing diets have stimulated increased production in

Map 1.1

Cross-border region of the Dendi



Source: Walther 2008

the neighbouring countries of Benin and Niger (Map 1.1). It highlights the position of women in the agricultural sector, the structural constraints on their activities and the barriers that they face in accessing markets.

- The second study focuses on the governance of the activities of West African women. It traces governance links between states, regional, international and non-

governmental organisations and the private actors charged with facilitating the economic activities of women in the region. This study was conducted across fifteen countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), plus Mauritania and Chad (Map 1.2). It highlights the most central institutional actors, how they co-ordinate their policies and the key

Map 1.2  
West Africa



structural barriers to implementing public policies dedicated to women’s economic activities. An analysis of this public policy network facilitates a better understanding

of the complexity of the institutional landscape connected to the economic promotion of women and promotes actor awareness of their role within the network.

## WOMEN IN TRADE NETWORKS

The social network analysis identified 1997 actors in the rice value chain between Benin, Niger and Nigeria using a “snowball” methodology. This approach maps the limits of a network beginning with a small group of merchants who were asked to identify other people with whom they are in contact, until the point of network saturation (see Chapter 4). This research confirms the structural marginalisation of women relative to men. From this perspective, gender is an excellent predictor of social interactions: while men have dense networks of male commercial partners, women are not very well-connected along the value chain to other women: only 22% of the women mention another woman as

commercial partner. This suggests that when women trade, they do so preferentially with men.

Although women are active participants in the production and in the retail sale of local rice in the Niger River valley, their structural importance – centrality in the language of networks (Chapter 3) – is still lower than that of men. These gender inequalities are not only related to the number of commercial partners that each individual has: the women interviewed were generally less well-connected to central actors and were also less likely to play intermediary roles.

These findings demonstrate that gender is rigidly correlated with structural position

in trade networks. Women producers and retailers occupy the ends of the value chain while the vital intermediary positions are held by men. In a value chain like rice where the most substantive profits are related to storage and wholesaling rather than processing, the peripheral position of women is synonymous with lower profits. Access to credit is one of the most important factors that prevents women from developing their businesses: only actors with significant capital can accumulate enough rice to take advantage of opportune moments to reap substantial profits.

Beyond these structural constraints, research on the actors in rice value chains shows that the state of the road network, the lack of storage infrastructure and border corruption also constrain economic activities. This region is widely renowned for its agricultural knowledge, abundance of water and soil quality, however, its commercial infrastructure is not responsive to its producers or merchants. Women are particularly penalised in their work by these factors to the extent that their activities frequently take place in precarious conditions, without stores or specialised storage space and without personal vehicles that would permit them to quickly get to market. Finally, the illegal payments demanded by border authorities slows traffic and makes travel more expensive. These practices, called “administrative hassles” were widely criticised by those surveyed. Women traveling to markets are particularly victimised because they frequently travel by foot and with small amounts of agricultural products.

From a spatial perspective, this research confirms that rapid urbanisation and associated shifts in dietary consumption trends have led to an increasing demand for agricultural products from the region. This demand for local agricultural products has led to the

development of remarkably integrated value chains between the countries of West Africa. In the rice network, for instance, the majority of the product of the Niger River valley reaches Nigerian markets through small urban centres in the Dendi region despite Nigerian rice import restrictions. This market supports thousands of small producers, rural and urban intermediaries, processors and retailers, many of whom are women. Nigerian merchants are major players in the rice value chain: they have the financial means to buy foreign rice and the vehicles to transport it to Nigeria. As such, the small cities in the Dendi, like Malanville and Gaya, function as relay points for the regional distribution of rice. Their production is temporarily centralised before being transported illegally onward to the Nigerian city of Kamba, from whence it continues to markets in Sokoto.

This research additionally confirms that the rice value chain is segmented by country. Only a small number of privileged intermediaries are capable of establishing cross-border commercial relationships. Close to three-quarters of the relationships between merchants are internal in Niger, in Nigeria and in Benin. These findings are a bit surprising given the notorious porosity of West African borders. However, they correlate with older studies that tracked large traders in the Dendi that showed that commercial intermediaries require well-developed professional skills and extended social networks, two characteristics that are rare in local commercial actors (Walther, 2015). The structural importance of these brokers is more important in a region like the Dendi, where most commercial activity is concentrated in the hands of an exogenous trader diaspora, than in regions that have well-established trade networks such the Hausa region where there have historically been strong cross-border networks.

## WOMEN AND GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

An analysis of policy efforts directed at promoting women’s economic activities shows that the governance network is constructed around a centre-periphery model where a small number of influential organisations are surrounded by organisations that are less

well linked. This type of network is structurally similar to the network of cross-border co-operation in West Africa (OECD/SWAC, 2017). Central actors – such as international organisations and some West African and European states – interact preferentially



with one another while peripheral actors are connected primarily to the core group rather than to each other.

More than a hundred organisations with varying degrees of institutional competencies and variable objectives worked in this area in 2018, a remarkable number given that economic development is a sub-area of gender programmes in the region. Nearly one-third of the organisations are governments, primarily from West Africa, Europe and North America. These organisations have established 173 formal partnerships with one another in West Africa. Multi- and supranational organisations are the best connected in this governance network where there are few intermediaries.

The study of the interpersonal relationships that connect the representatives of these organisations shows even more significant contrasts. Despite the co-ordination efforts of states and their partners, the network dedicated to the

promotion of women's economic activities is less dense and more fragmented than the cross-border co-operation network in the region. This lack of cohesion is notably due to the fact that although these organisations recognise the promotion of women as a fundamental element of economic development efforts more generally it is difficult to identify individuals within these organisations specifically in charge of this agenda.

The network is made up of more than 180 policymakers and specialists in the area of gender located primarily in West Africa and Western Europe and exhibits a structure in which actors are divided into small communities where it is generally difficult to communicate from one to the other in a small number of connections. These properties are typical of a random network and are not conducive to promoting women's entrepreneurship in the region.

## WHICH DEVELOPMENT POLICIES?

The productive and commercial activities of West African women are constrained by numerous functional and institutional obstacles. The study of the food system presented in this report suggests that the economic marginalisation of West African women can be explained by their structural role in the system. The example of the rice value chain shows that women do not have access to the most profitable positions in the network, because of an unequal access to education, training, to means of production, transport and capital. In border regions, the existence of illegal taxes to cross the borders adds yet another burden. Several institutional obstacles also tend to reinforce gender inequalities in the region. Despite the efforts of states in the area of gender equality, factors such as customary and religious norms that define the form of conjugal unions, the ideal size of families, marital responsibilities, or the distribution of inheritance impede gender parity.

### Network strategies

Development policies must take into account these limiting factors if they wish to promote

the productive and commercial activity of women in the region. One way to do this is to encourage strategies that strengthen the way women are connected to other economic and political actors through social networks. Several strategies allow policymakers to identify the most central actors, to promote the diffusion of norms and practices, to accelerate social change and to increase the efficiency of organisations.

- Policies seeking social change with respect to gender parity can focus on identifying the actors most likely to promote new practices within their networks. Women are a group through which social change can be disseminated. Disparities in income, training and professional experience between genders in the agricultural sector suggests that they are an ideal target group for policies aimed at increasing social capital.
- Interventions can equally be targeted at interpersonal relationships that exist within communities of friends, parents or peers. Already established channels of communication between individuals can be used to encourage certain social changes, such as later marriage, more space between

pregnancies and contraception. Development policies can focus on this principle in order to disseminate best practices within the professional networks of producers and traders in the region.

- Public policies can also intervene in the structure of social networks themselves, in order to alter the number of actors and the intensity of their relationships if the network is too sparse or divided into several distinct groups. In modifying the architecture of social relationships, these strategies can affect the acquisition of individual social capital.

### **Reinforcing the social capital of women in the food system**

Public policies aimed at intervening in social networks can reinforce the social capital of women by influencing the number of actors. The addition of actors seems particularly well-adapted to the case of agricultural value chains within which women are under-represented. The encouragement of business relationships is also effective in sparser networks or those that are strongly gender-biased, such as that of the rice value chain where links between women only represent 20% of the total and where numerous steps are required to connect one actor to another. In a network dominated by men, the promotion of women intermediaries is particularly advisable. Often inaccessible to many women due to their limited access to financial services, this position increases the value added of the product and the strategic position of women.

More generally, in an environment characterised by uncertainty, such as West Africa, the success of commercial enterprises depends as much on the capacity of actors to build business relationships with those that are close to them as establishing bridges with other more distant communities. Social capital resulting from the combination of close and more distant relations permits actors to compensate for the weaknesses of formal institutions that are supposed to regulate economic activities. It is particularly important in cross-border exchanges, which are characterised by a high level of uncertainty about prices, the reliability

of trading partners and on states' positions on imports and exports.

This report shows that women have fewer business relationships, are less well-connected to central actors and are less likely to act as intermediaries than men. To address these inequalities, public policies must first manage to increase the number of business connections within the communities in which women live. These relationships, which are strongly rooted in the local culture, are vectors of solidarity and protection against the multitude of uncertainties that characterise trade in the region.

Policies must also promote the development of business relationships that enable women to access resources that would not otherwise be locally available, such as with new commercial partners, non-governmental organisations, or financial institutions. This objective is inseparable from development policies aimed at increasing circulation in the region by reducing non-tariff barriers, one-stop border posts that simplify customs processes and through the construction of rural and interurban roads between zones of production and consumption.

### **Support the co-ordination of the governance network**

The network of governance organisations charged with the promotion of the economic activities of women in West Africa is fragmented into several groups. This situation occurs because of the limited number of experts on these questions and the low density of relationships between organisations. The promotion of women's productive and commercial activities in the region requires a more sustained effort to integrate the diverse national, non-governmental and international initiatives. This programmatic consolidation would also benefit from a reinforcement of formal and informal exchanges between the experts in each organisation, which have evolved in a relatively separated way to date.

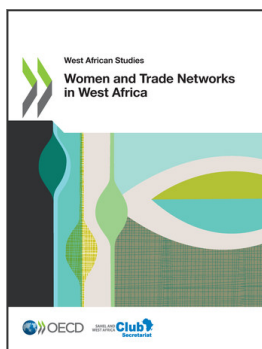
A strategy to expand the number of informal links in the realm of governance would improve co-ordination within and between organisations involved in the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in West Africa. A "small-world" structure that maximises both

internal links and connections to different external communities of specialists in the area of women's entrepreneurship could be adopted. This would allow communities that share similar interests to communicate more easily through links that transcend sectoral and geographical boundaries. This type of network

is more efficient than the random structure currently in place in the region and better adapted to the task of regional governance than a centralised structure within which co-ordination of information exchange is exercised by a single organisation.

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**From:**  
**Women and Trade Networks in West Africa**

**Access the complete publication at:**

<https://doi.org/10.1787/7d67b61d-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD/Sahel and West Africa Club (2019), “The role of women in the West African economy”, in *Women and Trade Networks in West Africa*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/fcab44ad-en>

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