

Fragility, Demographics, Gender Inequality

Mali

Luc Tucker

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ABSTRACT: Mali has many characteristics of a fragile and conflict-affected state. Like many other fragile states, Mali has high population growth, which puts pressure on the country's resources, including food supplies. Gender inequality in the country is also high, with women and girls experiencing disadvantages in many aspects of life. These challenges are closely related, so coordinated reforms are required to break the vicious cycle which has left Mali trapped in a state of fragility since 2012.

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SELECTED ISSUES PAPERS

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Contents

I. Historical Context and Current Challenges	5
II. Reforms Enacted to Date	7
III. Future Priorities and Measures of Success	8
IV. Conclusion	8

FIGURES

1. Population in Mali and Other WAEMU Countries.....	5
2. Gender Inequality Index	6
3. Labor Market Participation Rates by Gender	6
4. Fund for Peace Fragile States Index Ranking	7
References	9

I. Historical Context and Current Challenges

Mali’s classification as a fragile and conflict-affected state (FCS) reflects a number of interrelated factors. These factors lead to ‘structural fragility’, which in turn causes persistently weak growth. Widespread food insecurity; low capacity of the state to provide basic services; and a lack of basic infrastructure all act to prevent sustained improvements in living standards. In addition, the political system has been found to be ‘fragile to stress’, such that the country has been ravaged by frequent bouts of internal and external conflict in recent years. (See the Country Engagement Strategy for a detailed discussion of these different types of fragility.)

Population growth in Mali is among the highest in the world, weighing on already-limited resources.

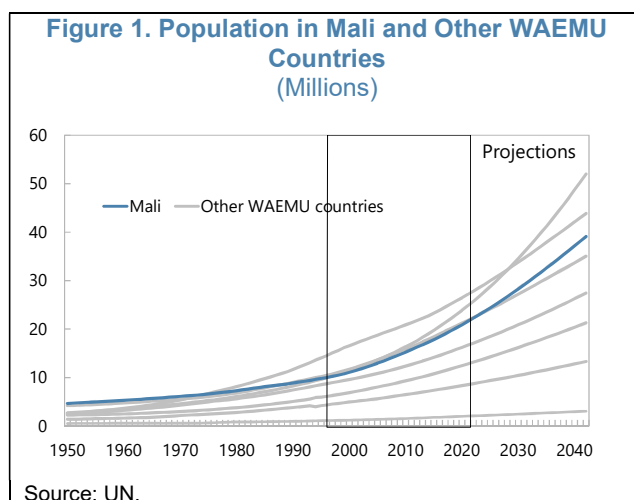
The fertility rate is estimated at six children per woman on average. Although this fertility rate has been slowly declining since the early 1990s, when it was above 7, it remains extremely high relative to global averages. The population almost doubled from about 10 to 20 million between 2000 and 2020 and is expected to almost double again over the coming 20 years (Figure 1). High population growth leads to pressures on the country’s resources, including food supplies. It may also create wider economic

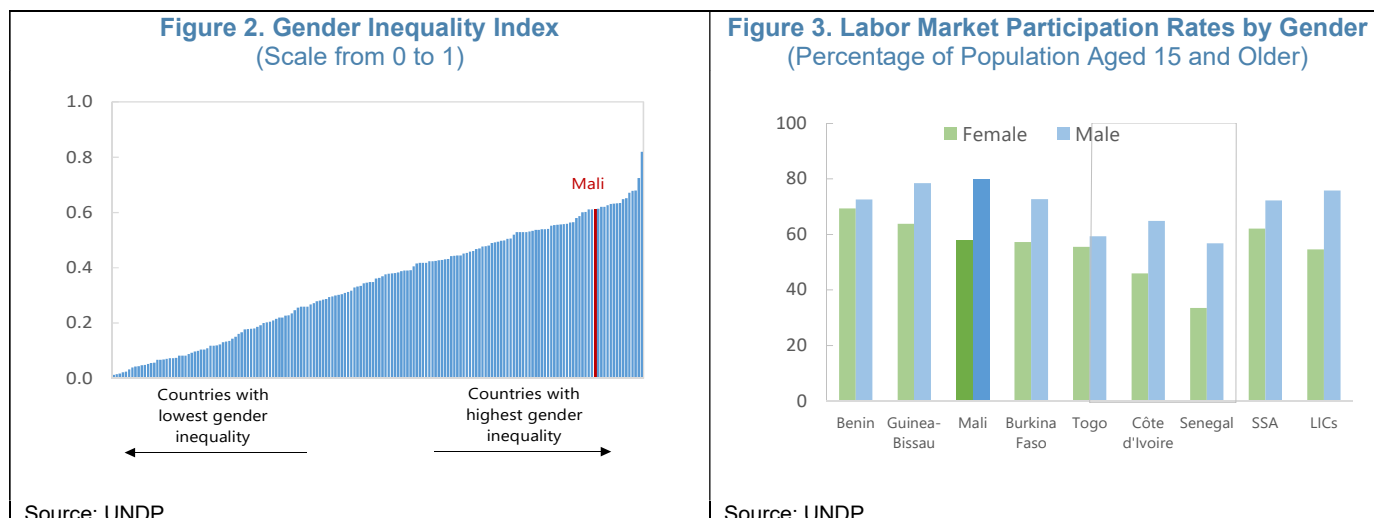
pressures if the number of jobs created cannot keep pace with the high population growth. This could lead to a rise in unemployment, force workers to take jobs in the informal sector—already accounting for more than 95 percent of total employment—and increase the risk of social tensions. Changes in the age structure of the population and a rise in the number of people relying on state support for basic needs will increase the dependency ratio and add to pressure on public finances.

Gender-based inequality in Mali is also extremely high. Mali is ranked 155th out of the 170 countries included in the 2021 UNDP Gender Inequality Index (Figure 2). Women and girls in Mali continue to experience disadvantages in many aspects of life, including health, justice, and education. Maternal mortality is among the highest in the world. Gender-based violence is also widespread across the country, and women seeking justice following incidents of violence often face social pressures and rights violations. Educational attainment among women is among the lowest in the world, with only around 8 percent of women over 25 having completed lower secondary education. For men over 25, the comparable figure is 15½ percent.

As a result of these multi-dimensional and interrelated factors, women are severely underrepresented in the labor force.

The gap between male and female labor force participation rates in Mali is the second highest in the WAEMU, which suggests there is scope for significant improvement with potentially large economic benefits (Figure 3). Inequalities are particularly prevalent among skilled jobs.





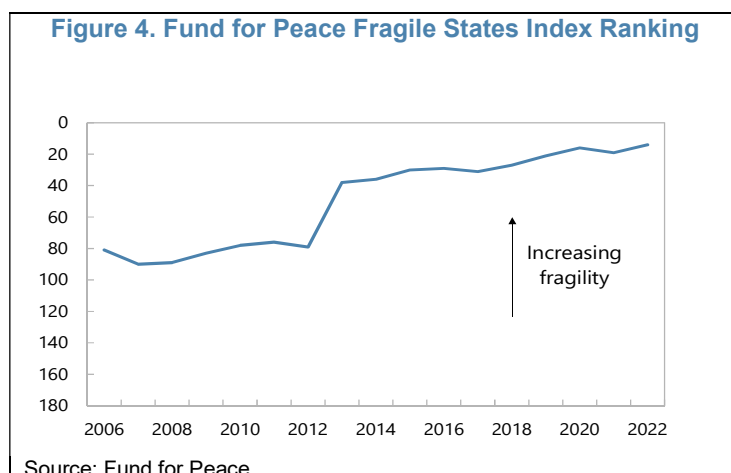
Women in Mali also hold fewer high-profile public positions than men. Women lag men in political representation, for example. Despite playing a prominent role during electoral campaigns, there are relatively few women attaining leadership positions in politics. The share of female parliamentary representatives is less than 29 percent, although that is higher than the average across sub-Saharan Africa, which is just under 28 percent (IPU, 2023). Women also continue to be under-represented in appointed positions as government officials.

Increasing female participation in these public roles offers wide-ranging potential benefits. Participation by women in peace negotiations and constitutional reform processes has been found to increase the likelihood that agreements will be reached and implemented (Dudouet and Schädel, 2021). One study also suggests that those agreements tend to last longer: the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least 15 years is found to be 35 percent higher when women participate (UN Women, 2015). The economic empowerment of women can also contribute to post-conflict recovery and reconstruction.

The challenges facing Mali in terms of fragility and conflict, demographics and gender inequality are closely related. Economies and societies where women are most disadvantaged tend to have higher fertility rates, for example, with research showing that there is a close link between low education opportunities for women and the average number of children per female (World Bank, 2018). Gender inequality in Mali is therefore likely to have been an important driver of the wider demographic challenges facing the country. Unequal societies also tend to have low access to family planning services and birth control. High fertility rates in turn affect women's health and productive capacity but also the time they can devote to seeking and undertaking employment, leading to lower growth in GDP per capita. The resulting weak output growth can create the conditions for discontent and ultimately lead to social tensions. In turn, weak growth and heightened tensions can also lead to a further increase in gender inequality, creating a vicious cycle. The frequency of crises and conflicts in fragile contexts further exposes women and girls to forced marriages, unpaid economic participation, and sexual and gender-based violence (OECD, 2022).

These feedback loops are consistent with the finding that when a country faces fragility and conflict, it tends to be persistent. This creates the risk of a fragility ‘trap’ (IEO Report, 2018). When a country falls into fragility, the ‘drivers’ of that fragility—the shocks—coupled with the ‘sources’ of fragility—the conditions which make the country vulnerable to stress—lead to adverse outcomes, which in turn leave the country more susceptible to future shocks (see Country Engagement Strategy for a discussion of drivers and sources of fragility in a conceptual framework).

According to the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index, Mali’s fragility ranking relative to other countries increased sharply in 2012 and has continued to increase steadily since (Figure 4). In the latest index, Mali is ranked 14th out of almost 180 countries in terms of fragility. Sustained policy action is required to overcome the considerable hurdles to exiting the fragility trap. Research suggests that supporting growth, increasing social/education spending, strengthening government effectiveness, and increasing political inclusion can be especially beneficial (Akanbi and others, 2021).



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II. Reforms Enacted to Date

In Mali, reforms to address fragility have included both shorter-term measures to reduce the immediate risk of conflict and medium-term measures which create the conditions for a more stable society.

Security and military spending averaged around 5½ percent of GDP in 2021 and 2022, the highest in the Sahel G5 and a significant increase relative to the previous decade when it averaged just over 3 percent. Given the lack of fiscal space—reflecting in part a fall in external support including grants—that higher security spending has come at the expense of other priority spending including public investment and social spending. A credible, transparent, and inclusive election process would help different groups to feel empowered and reduce the risk of future conflict.

Successive governments in Mali have created a number of institutional mechanisms to address demographic pressures by improving gender equality. In 1997 the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and Families (MPFEF) was created to address longstanding systemic biases. These aims were further supported by the National Policy on Promotion and Protection of Children (PNPPE) in 2014 and the National Family Policy (PNF) in 2015. A National Gender Policy was also introduced in 2015 with the aim of improving the representation of women in appointed and elected bodies, including a requirement that the share of either gender in public agencies should not be lower than 30 percent. In 2017, the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and Families launched the Emergence of Women’s Capacities (PRECOFEM) as a forum for information exchange on these topics.

The National Action Plan for 2019-2023 also ensures that women are given prominent roles in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, as well as in post-conflict governance. The plan provides

support to women's rights organizations, with a view to empowering and encouraging women at all levels to participate in peacebuilding.

III. Future Priorities and Measures of Success

The empowerment of women in Mali can help to unlock the country's growth potential. Further efforts to address gender gaps in education, especially among poorer households, would be particularly beneficial. Other priorities are to establish more secure property rights for women and facilitating access to land and credit.

Improvements to the care infrastructure including the social safety net would be expected to support a rise in female participation. Well-designed social protection systems can contribute to poverty reduction and help reduce labor market inequalities. They can also stimulate productive activity and economic growth, as well as creating resilience to crises. Reforms that are likely to have the greatest macroeconomic impact should be prioritized. They include improved access to education for women and girls and could be guided by the need for skills in expanding sectors. Policies could also focus on rural areas, where economic diversification is lowest and where fertility and gender inequality are highest. Women's rights organizations and gender experts should also be involved in the design and implementation of these reforms.

Donors and international partners could do more to help address gender inequalities in response to fragility and conflict. International assistance could be further targeted towards improving gender equality and additional funding could be offered conditional on the successful implementation of reforms. An improvement in diplomatic relations with international partners would increase the likelihood of Mali receiving support grants and funding more generally, which could help to address fragility, demographic challenges and gender inequality.

Given the interrelated nature of fragility, demographics and gender inequality, reforms should be conducted in coordination. Well-designed packages of interventions could help on multiple fronts. Efforts to widen education opportunities combined with strengthening of the social safety net could not only reduce conflict, but also help in empowering women and increasing female labor force participation.

IV. Conclusion

Mali has been trapped in a state of fragility since 2012, with high population growth and gender inequality both playing a role in that fragility. A number of reforms have been enacted to date which aim to address these issues, but further efforts are needed. These could include the empowerment of women, improvements to the care infrastructure including the social safety net and improved collaboration with international partners. The challenges posed by fragility, demographics and gender inequality are closely related, so coordinated reforms are required to break the vicious cycle.

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