

Q&A: Sierra Leone's women farmers use a custom called bora to access land—but it's making them more vulnerable

August 21 2024, by Bankolay Theodore Turay



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Bora—a type of thank you gift—is a Sierra Leonean custom of respect that is often used in relation to land. For instance, informal farmers pay

bora to landowners to be able to farm on their land.

But bora has changed over the years and is having a negative impact on women, who are responsible for much of the west African country's farming. In Sierra Leone, [land ownership](#)—and therefore use of land for farming—vests in men.

Women's access to land for sustainable livelihoods is the [subject of a Ph.D.](#) by land rights scholar Bankolay Theodore Turay. We asked him about his research.

What role do women play in agriculture in Sierra Leone?

Agriculture is the [backbone](#) of Sierra Leone's economy, employing [over 60%](#) of the population and contributing [nearly half](#) of the gross domestic product (GDP).

Women play a vital role in the sector. They make up [around 70%](#) of the agricultural labor force. They're primarily responsible for cultivating crops, harvesting, and processing [agricultural products](#). They are indispensable to the country's food security and economic growth.

Many women are the primary income earners for their families, using agricultural proceeds to support education, health care and other household needs.

What did your research find?

My study of three years, conducted in five peri-urban communities around Sierra Leone, involved in-depth interviews with 120 women.

I found that women faced challenges which limited their agricultural potential.

The first challenge is that deeply ingrained customs and patriarchal traditions limit their access to, and control over, land.

From inheritance laws favoring male heirs to customary practices and laws which grant land management authority to male heads of households, these conventions continue to shape land ownership patterns, often to the disadvantage of women.

The country has a written constitution that guarantees equal rights for all citizens, including women. But the reality often differs. Customary law is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of Sierra Leone, particularly in less urban areas. It governs many aspects of life, including land tenure, marriage, inheritance and dispute resolution. Women's rights, especially land rights, are frequently undermined.

The second challenge is that women have limited access to agricultural inputs, including seeds, fertilizers, energy, pesticides, veterinary drugs and equipment. Policy makers and administrators typically still assume that men are the farmers and women play only a "supportive role" as farmers' wives. Agricultural extension services still do not attach much importance to reaching women farmers or women on the farm.

Third, women struggle with access to credit or loans which they could use to grow or support their business. If a woman does not own or have control of the land she farms on, she will not be able to offer it up as collateral for a loan.

Fourth, women do not have the required certification to trade produce internationally. This is due to financial constraints and the bureaucratic processes involved to acquire the business certificate to trade. Women

are therefore typically confined to domestic markets.

One way women can access land is through the traditional custom known as bora. This practice involves women cultivating land allocated to them by their husbands or male relatives, often on a temporary basis.

While bora provides some access to land, it does not guarantee ownership or long-term security.

What is bora and how does it work?

Bora is a customary payment deeply ingrained in the cultures of Sierra Leone's north-west ethnic groups.

Traditionally, individuals without ancestral land rights, such as women from non-landowning families, would offer a symbolic gift, like rice or chickens, to cultivate food on others' land. This practice evolved into an annual payment.

Originally, bora consisted of agricultural produce, but cash payments have become increasingly common. The amount is determined by land size and market conditions.

Those offering bora would publicly—in the presence of the chief or elders—recognize the land's owner and their right to use it. This would deter others from making competing claims to the land.

The practice of bora emerged as a central theme during my interviews with women farmers. Participants frequently used bora to get access to land, highlighting its significance in their lives and livelihoods.

How does bora affect these women farmers?

My research reveals that bora hindered women's access to land and perpetuated [gender inequality](#) in this part of Sierra Leone.

For instance, in one district, over 40% of women reported being denied land access because they couldn't pay the cost of bora.

The practice also makes them vulnerable to exploitative terms, including sexual favors, to secure access to land.

The economic consequences for women are severe. Without land, they have limited opportunities for food production and income generation. In the Mabolleh community, women farmers with land access had 70% higher incomes compared to those without.

Moreover, bora reinforces patriarchal power structures. When women lack secure land rights, their voices are not heard in community affairs. They're more susceptible to domestic violence due to their economic dependency and limited autonomy within the household. Without power they have fewer options to escape or challenge their situation.

Bora supports a system where women are disadvantaged and denied their fundamental rights.

What needs to be done about it?

The government, other policymakers and local traditional authorities must take steps:

- Policymakers and development practitioners must shift from short-term monetization strategies which aim to capture the real estate value of customary lands or strengthen the finances of local authorities. Instead they should focus on long-term solutions that empower women as genuine landowners and managers.

- Land tenure laws that recognize and protect women's land rights must be enacted and enforced. This includes customary laws. Harmonizing customary laws with constitutional provisions on gender equality is crucial.
- Women must be empowered through awareness campaigns that can help them understand their rights and claim their land.
- Women must be encouraged to participate in community decision-making processes. This can lead to more gender-sensitive policies and practices.
- Women should be supported to establish cooperatives that can provide them with collective bargaining power, access to markets, and financial resources.
- Exploring alternative land tenure arrangements can provide more equitable access to land for women—for instance, secure land leasing systems from land owning families.
- Women could form groups to collectively lease the land.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Q&A: Sierra Leone's women farmers use a custom called bora to access land—but it's making them more vulnerable (2024, August 21) retrieved 25 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-qa-sierra-leone-women-farmers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.