

# Legal Literacy Clinics and Widows' Property Claims

*A Comparative Study of Inheritance Dispute Resolution in Kayes, Mali (2000–2024)*

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## ABSTRACT

In the Kayes Region, widows frequently face dispossession following a husband's death due to competing customary and statutory inheritance norms. Public legal literacy clinics have emerged as a key intervention to address this, yet their long-term efficacy in resolving disputes remains under-examined. This study compares the processes and outcomes of inheritance disputes involving widows who participated in legal literacy clinics with those who did not, assessing the clinics' effect on dispute resolution dynamics and property retention. A comparative, longitudinal design was employed, analysing archival clinic records and conducting in-depth interviews with widows, community elders, and legal practitioners. Cases were tracked from initial dispute to final resolution. Clinic participants were three times more likely to achieve a formal or hybrid resolution than non-participants. A key theme was the strategic navigation of plural legal systems; however, sustained pressure from marital families often undermined gains, with a significant proportion of successful cases later facing renewed contestation. While legal literacy clinics significantly improve initial dispute resolution outcomes for widows, their long-term effectiveness is constrained by deeply embedded social norms and ongoing familial opposition, highlighting the limits of a purely rights-based approach. Programmes should integrate sustained paralegal support and community dialogue initiatives targeting elders and male family members. Policy must better harmonise statutory protections with locally legitimate customary arbitration practices. legal empowerment, gender, inheritance, plural legal systems, Mali, widowhood, dispute resolution This paper provides novel longitudinal evidence on the contested sustainability of legal literacy interventions, introducing the concept of 'resolution erosion' to describe the gradual undermining of formal outcomes in plural legal contexts.

**Keywords:** *Legal pluralism, Inheritance disputes, Gender and property rights, Legal empowerment, Sahel region, Comparative case study, Widows' rights*

### Article Highlights

- Longitudinal study reveals clinic participants 3x more likely to secure formal/hybrid inheritance resolutions.
- Introduces concept of 'resolution erosion' to describe the undermining of formal outcomes over time.
- Strategic navigation of plural legal systems is key, but social norms and familial opposition constrain long-term efficacy.
- Calls for programmes integrating sustained paralegal support and community dialogue targeting elders and male kin.

### Policy Imperative

Findings indicate a need to better harmonise statutory protections with locally legitimate customary arbitration practices to achieve durable outcomes.

*This study provides novel longitudinal evidence on the sustainability of legal empowerment interventions.*

## ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

This is an abstract-only publication. The complete research paper with full methodology, results, discussion, and references is available upon request.

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