



GENDER INEQUALITIES IN CELL PHONE USE IN THE FULANI CULTURAL AREA OF GOGOUNOU, BENIN

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ABSTRACT

Women's issues are the subject of many debates in African societies, and numerous mechanisms for promoting gender equality are gradually being put in place. However, gender inequalities still persist in the daily lives of Beninese people in terms of technology. The aim of this qualitative research project is to analyze gender inequalities in the use of cell phones in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. Around thirty participants from varied backgrounds were approached through a semi-structured interview, documentary research and direct observation. Analyzed through the prism of a Weberian approach updated by F. Gonthier (2004), the significant results were obtained with the help of an interview guide, a grid and a reading sheet designed accordingly. These show that gender inequalities are rooted in a duality of perspective (cult and cultural). The religious aspect should not be overlooked, given the predominance and observance of social codes, notably the Koran, in this commune of northern Benin.

Keywords: Gender inequalities; Fulani cultural area; cell phone; Gogounou.

RESUME

La problématique de la femme nourrit maints débats dans les sociétés africaines et de nombreux mécanismes de promotion du genre sont progressivement mis en place. Cependant, les inégalités du genre rythment encore le quotidien des béninois sur le plan technologique. La présente recherche de type qualitatif vise à analyser les inégalités du genre dans l'utilisation du téléphone portable dans l'aire culturelle peulh de Gogounou. Ainsi, une trentaine d'acteurs assez diversifiés ont été approchés au travers d'un entretien semi structuré, d'une recherche documentaire et d'une observation directe. Analyser sous le prisme d'une approche wébérienne actualisée par F. Gonthier (2004), les résultats probants sont obtenus à la faveur d'un guide d'entretien, d'une grille et d'une fiche de lecture conçus conséquemment. De ces derniers, on retient que les inégalités du genre trouvent leur fondement dans une dualité de perspective (culturelle et culturelle). Le volet religieux n'est aucunement à occulter lorsqu'on considère la prédominance et l'observance accordée aux codes sociaux notamment le Coran dans cette Commune du Nord-Bénin.

Mots clés : Inégalités du genre ; aire culturelle peulh ; téléphone portable ; Gogounou.

INTRODUCTION

The interest and usefulness of digital technology have been proven at all levels of society and geography. The use of digital technology varies in different environments, such as rural, peri-urban and urban areas. Some use it for specialized applications, while others primarily use it for basic functions like calls. But W.R. Kaboré (2018) notes that certain technical (the digital divide), political, social (illiteracy, , poverty) and cultural factors hinder users' appropriation of the cell phone.

Indeed, A. Kiyindou (2018) explains the place and role of technology in the cultural, economic and social development of a society. He points out that mobile telephony, conceived in a Western world, appeared from the outset to be highly unsuited to the context of use in developing country. These societies are generally very communitarian, whereas cell phones and computers in particular seem by nature individual, requiring a personal and specific relationship with the user. Individuals often use computers in isolation and cell phone numbers are typically private. According to W.R. Kaboré (2018), this situation shows that adequate use of the cell phone contributes to a social organization, and community life remains under threat, as its appropriation has social drawbacks in the direction of individualization. These adaptations in Africa need further verification, especially given the importance of community life in the social organization of rural areas.. With this in mind, A. Nyamba (2005) states that any policy for introducing the cell phone into rural areas, or indeed any technology in general, should take account of the specific characteristics of each rural environment.

Similarly, rural residents often have different levels of access to, and use of, digital technology compared to their urban counterparts.. These rural populations remain weakened by the cultural yoke. This situation is most notable among the Fulani women of Gogounou, who still suffer from inequalities due to socio-cultural constraints. Notwithstanding the advantages offered by digital technology, particularly in terms of long-distance communication and the ability to cross the boundaries of time and space, the Fulani women of Gogounou face difficulties of all kinds, reflecting the stereotype of their communities' cultural norms and values.

For J. S. Keane (2006), women living in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged in the digital world, as they have to overcome barriers that relate both to gender factors and to geographical locations. In general, women have less economic and political power, which limits their ability to enter the new world of ICT. In the same vein, J. Jouet (2000) asserts that the use of ICT, whether at home or at work, is not built in a vacuum, but is part of the social relations of power that run through social structures, the forms of domination being of course more or less pronounced and modifiable according to the cultures of companies and family units. L. Fortunati and A. Edwards

(2023) trace historical patterns of gender relations in communication.. Indeed, they believe that in most societies, the norms that have been set up make women submissive beings whose voice is not often preponderant. With the advent of the cell phone, this relationship became even more entrenched, as the possession of such a tool was perceived as a sign of domination (of one sex over the other). Even the advent of the computer and the Internet, despite the legitimate thirst for empowerment induced by women's movements, was unable to change much.

According to UN Women's Focus on Gender Equality (2022), the opportunities of the digital revolution also present the risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality. Growing inequalities are becoming increasingly evident in digital skills and access to technology, with women being left behind as a result of this digital gender divide. In the UNDP (2022) report on digital transformation and gender, these various findings are reinforced. This shows that digital technologies are a powerful driver of gender equality, enabling women and girls to access new information, opportunities and resources

However, the digital divide between the sexes persists, in part due to deep-rooted social and gender norms and stereotypes. As a result, many women, especially those in developing countries and, particularly, the Fulani women of Gogounou, face ongoing difficulties in accessing and using digital technologies. Yet, A. Leroy (2020, p. 25) believes that :

In the field of information and communication technologies, gender concerns have focused on the idea of inserting "insufficiently included" women, in particular women from the South, into the digital market, so that they can reap the benefits and the divide can be narrowed".

In addition, several observations were made during the course of this research. These include the persistence of socio-cultural constraints on women's use of digital technology in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, the limited use of cell phones by women, the stigmatization of women cell phone users, and the financial difficulties women face in obtaining a one-touch cell phone. The problem of this research is gender inequality in the use of cell phones in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. The central question that emerges is: How can we explain this gender inequality in the use of cell phones in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou?

In view of this concern, it should be noted that socio-cultural stereotypes explain the reproduction of gender relations in the use of cell phones. The aim of this research is to identify gender stereotypes in cell phone use by Fulani women in Gogounou.

1. Material and method

1.1. Presentation of the research scope

The commune of Gogounou, gateway to the Alibori department from the south, is situated over 615 km from Cotonou and is bisected by the 45 km stretch of the N2 inter-state road linking Benin to Niger. With an area of 4,910 km², it constitutes 18.66% of Alibori's total area. It is bordered by several communes: Kandi to the northeast, Banikoara to the northwest, Ségbana to the east, Kérou to the west, Bembèrèkè to the south, Kalalé to the southeast, and Sinendé to the southwest

At the 2013 census (RGPH 4), the commune had 117,523 inhabitants, including 14,248 for the Gogounou borough. Inhabitants are mainly from Baatonou (53.8%), followed by Fulani people (41.6%). Additionally, 4.4 % foreigners from other localities in Benin . Islam is the dominant religion (67.1%).

The commune comprises six boroughs: Bagou, Gounarou, Ouara, Sori, Zougou-Pantossi and Gogounou, as shown in figure 1.

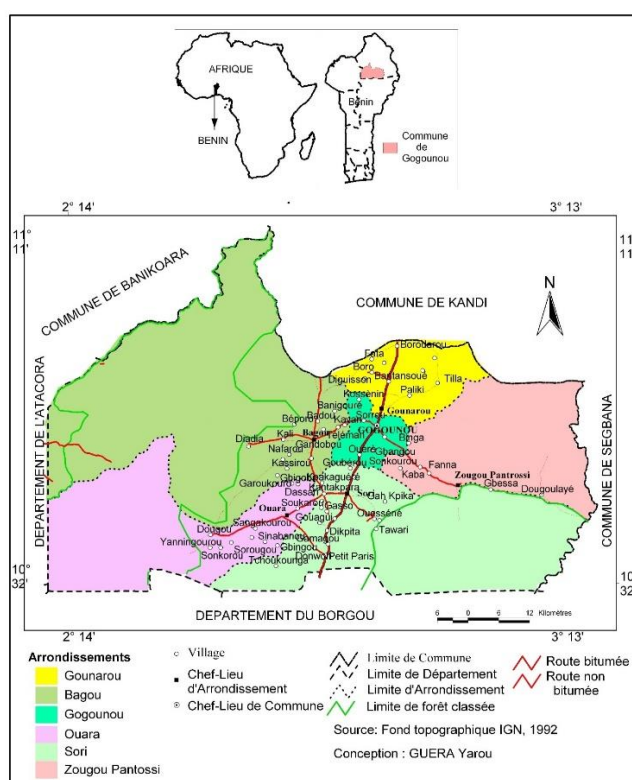


Figure 1: Map of Gogounou commune

Source: IGN 1992 topographic base, field data, May 2023.

2. Methodological approach

Methodology guides research direction and justifies the researcher's choices.. According to M. Grawitz (2001, p. 35)"method is a set of intellectual operations by which a discipline seeks to reach the truths it pursues, demonstrates them and verifies them".

Thus, This research takes place in the Commune of Gogounou. The nature of this research is qualitative, as it seeks to obtain information related to gender inequalities in the use of cell phones in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. The sampling technique used is that of the reasoned choice. Informants are identified on the basis of a fundamental criterion. The informant must belong to the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. Documentary research (reading sheet), semi-structured interviews (interview guide) and direct observation (observation grid) were used to collect data from the selected informants. . A total of thirty participants were selected and interviewed for this research during the month of May 2023. Data counting and processing are carried out manually and with Microsoft Word and Excel. The results are progressively presented and discussed using the comprehensive theory of M. Weber (1938), and further elaborated by F. Gonthier (2004).

3. Results

3.1. *Cultural barriers around gender in cell phone use*

Like all African peoples who are renowned for their diversity, cultural and religious realities vary from one locality to another in Benin. And these realities structure the lifestyles of its inhabitants. In some southern areas of Benin, there are no obstacles to the use of cell phones (C. L. Babadjidé, 2023). On the other hand, in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, there are obstacles to the use of cell phones by women.

Empirical data indicate that Fulani women are forbidden by their husbands to use the cell phone. Indeed, the use of cell phones by Fulani women in Gogounou is strongly influenced by socio-cultural stereotypes about the reproduction of gender relations. Some of the people we met during data collection believe that the use of cell phones by women is a source of infidelity. Formal prohibition represents a first aspect of cell phone use for women. One breeder (59) states:

there are impolite women who use their cell phones to call other men on the sly. Sometimes if women make such calls without the husband's knowledge, the community deities intervene and "...due to a mystical illness, the misdeeds are discovered.". It also happens that the husband intercepts things earlier] (Breeder, 59 years old)

It should be stressed that this exclusion of the Fulani woman of Gogounou is shared by this community under the pretext of protecting her from infidelity. The words of this respondent illustrate this:

[It has been observed that when women have a cell phone, they only make a mess, i.e. they live with their spouses and look for other suitors outside (...). For example, thanks to the cell phone, I have business partners, I'm in contact with the Yoruba, Fon and Hausa, and that's how we communicate. That's why we buy SIM card-free phones for our wives, so they can listen to music. Their SIM card is the memory card]. (Gilbert, T, 24, Gogounou).

In the same vein, another informant believes that:

[Infidelity is a cultural phenomenon among the Fulani. For him, this practice is tolerated by the community for men, whereas it is deadly for women. The authorization of cell phone use by Fulani women is a source of marital conflict, divorce and murder] (Breeder, 54, Gogounou).

The cell phone is perceived as a tool that places Fulani women in conflict with the norms of their community. As a result, every measure is taken to prohibit its use. Yet, such an attitude creates an imbalance in relations between men and women, with women being the main victims.

According to L. Fortunati and A. Edwards (2023), in most societies, the norms that have been set up make women submissive, and their voice is often not the dominant one. With the advent of the cell phone, this relationship is consolidated, as the possession of such a tool is perceived in terms of domination (...). Even the advent of the computer and the Internet, despite the legitimate thirst for empowerment induced by women's movements, was unable to change much.

The cultural aspect of the prohibition is also perceptible through social codes, in this case the Koran. Many social actors rely on religious precepts to keep women under their yoke. As the Commune of Gogounou is predominantly Muslim, women have no choice but to internalize their submission.

This view was endorsed by some interviewed. For example, a Fulani imam (aged 59) declared: "My wife will never, ever use a cell phone, because it's an instrument of prostitution. Even if my wife could afford it, I'd take it away from her".

However, to preserve marital harmony and perpetuate patriarchy, some heads of the family prevent their wives from using cell phones. In the words of one of them:

[I married her and now she's my responsibility. When she talks, you have to ask my permission, whereas with the cell phone she can talk to anyone. When her cell phone is broken, I take the opportunity to stop buying her one. Now, they call my phone to speak to her]. (Muslim retailer, 42, Gogouou).

It's worth noting that in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, women who managed to buy a cell phone have had to sell it to keep the peace in their marriage. A housewife explains why she doesn't use her cell phone:

[I had a cell phone that worked well, my husband always thought that I was using the mobile to give information about what was happening in our couple to the extended family. Every time I pick up my mobile, there are arguments (...) he even hits me when it's a relative calling. I had to sell the phone to get some peace]. (Muslim housewife, 27,)

3.2. Gender-based cult barriers to cell phone use

Endogenous beliefs influence the use of cell phones in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. Indeed, in the context of the present research, empirical data reveal that many actors subscribe to supernatural beliefs in the use of the cell phone. A priestess mentioned: "I often hear that some people use cell phones for mystical purposes. They call you just to listen your voice and then something unfortunate happens to you". This statement confirms that of the district chief of a Fulani camp, who said:

[We live isolated in Fulani camps, and naturally our wives develop infidelity. We men are not stable because of our activities. Such a situation leads to adultery among women. In this circumstance, if you allow your wives to use the cell phone, you're facilitating their infidelity and adultery. There are also men who use endogenous practices to attract other people's wives to them, or to snatch them away by using cell phones. All they need is the woman's number and she'll pick up the call. This is a fundamental reason why cell phones are forbidden to women]. (Muslim breeder, 43, M, Gogounou).

From this verbatim, it is clear that the concept of infidelity has cultic underpinnings to force the woman to comply. In this case, through language, the woman are made to do things, forced to adhere, even though her transhumance and grazing activities predispose her to do so. Prohibition is seen as a safeguard against the phenomenon. In the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, women's access to cell phones is a royal channel for adultery. In addition, images and other erotic videos are tangible temptations for Fulani women to commit an act of infidelity. Cell phone ownership by a minority of women is part of an evasive perspective (melody broadcaster).

4. Discussion

Our results show that in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, women are excluded from the use of cell phones. The exclusion factors are religious, cultural and cultic.

These results are in line with the findings of A. Leroy (2020), who said that women are "insufficiently included" in the digital world. The Digital Responsibility Institute, in a report (2022), also confirms these results, estimating that in 2020, 57% of women will not have access to digital technology, compared with 62% of men, and above all "(...) worldwide, 327 million fewer women than men use mobile internet".

The results also show that the ban on Fulani women using their husbands' cell phones is strongly influenced by socio-cultural stereotypes based on the reproduction of gender relations. These results are in line with those of J. Jouet (2000), which attest that the uses of ICT, whether in the home or in the workplace, don't fit into a single space. However, these uses of digital technology are distinguished by the social relations of power that social communities experience.

The forms of domination are more or less pronounced, and vary according to the cultures of companies and the family units. Similarly, this constraint imposed on the Fulani woman of Gogounou corroborates the findings of L. Fortunati and A. Edwards (2023), who postulate that in most societies, the norms set up make women submissive beings whose voice is not often preponderant.

Moreover, the fact that the Fulani woman uses her cell phone as a melody player confirms the conclusions of A. Kiyindou (2018), who explains the place and role of technology in the cultural, economic and social development of a society. He points out that mobile telephony, conceived in a Western world, appeared from the outset to be highly unsuited to the context of use in the countries of the South. These societies are generally very communitarian, whereas cell phones and computers in particular seem by nature individual, requiring a personal and specific relationship with the user.

The data collected showed that in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou, there are obstacles to the use of cell phones by women. These findings run counter to those of C. L. Babadjidé (2023), who mentions that cultural and cultic realities vary from one locality to another in Benin. And these realities shape the lifestyles of its inhabitants. In some localities, there are no obstacles to the use of digital technology. W.R. Kaboré (2018) notes that certain technical, political, social and cultural factors hinder the appropriation of cell phones by users. The present research supports these findings and shows that the concept of infidelity is cultural in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. Women's access to cell phones encourages this phenomenon, prompting husbands to take appropriate measures to prevent their wives from using digital phones.

Other research has shown that digital technology is currently associated with masculine stereotypes in society. Indeed, the disciplines linked to this field are perceived as not requiring many social contacts, a lot of interactions with machines is an innate talent (I. Collet, 2019).

However, despite the gender equality frequently put forward in Western and African societies, (which are modifying their legislative framework in this direction and offering the same educational and employment opportunities to all), men and women continue anyway to be socialized differently, and gender stereotypes remain entrenched and influence social behaviors as well as educational and career choices. (W. Wood and A. Eagly, 2012).

Available statistical data show the current relevance of such a perspective. Indeed, inequalities between men and women, particularly in access to New Information and Communication Technology (NICT), highlight the recent increase in new disparities in social relations. The authors focus on the causes of marital separation, and show how this amplifies economic inequalities between spouses, to the detriment of

women. But while statistical data attest to inequalities, they do not enable us to understand their real sources. To this end, C. Bessière and S. Gollac (2020), analyze what they call the patriarchal unconscious of supposedly egalitarian institutions where boys are privileged in social reproduction strategies. In other words, the authors highlight the male dominance of digital access. In conclusion, C. Bessière and S. Gollac (2020) show how digital inequalities contribute to reinforcing gender inequalities, but also to maintaining class inequalities.

CONCLUSION

This research has identified gender stereotypes in the use of cell phones by Fulani women in Gogounou. Indeed, the prohibition of cell phone use by Fulani men is strongly influenced by socio-cultural stereotypes about the reproduction of gender relations. These gender disparities are often reflected in cultural prescriptions that make women submissive beings whose voices are not often authoritative. There are also a number of endogenous reasons that severely limit women's access to digital technology in the Fulani cultural area of Gogounou. In the research locality, endogenous practices are often observed to lure other people's women away through the use of cell phones. It should also be pointed out that the use of digital technology by women also contributes to extra-marital affairs of women in the research environment. However, community players have developed strategies to circumvent the phenomenon of infidelity within couples. For example, men buy their wives SIM card-free phones, so they can listen to music., for their SIM card is the memory card, in a context where gender equality is being implemented for sustainable development.

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