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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 25-29, 2019



CUSTOMARY LAND TENURE SYSTEMS AND GENDERED LAND RIGHTS IN GHANA'S NORTHERN REGION: RESULTS FROM PHASE II GENDER EQUITY AND LAND TENURE FOCUS GROUPS

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the
“2019 WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”
The World Bank - Washington DC, March 25-29, 2019**

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Abstract

We present results from Phase II of the Gendered Equity and Land Tenure (GELT) focus groups, conducted in Ghana's Northern Region in 2018 to further investigate gender equity and customary land tenure systems among men and women smallholder soybean farmers in Ghana's Northern Region. Preliminary GELT Phase II results reconfirmed that the primary way a woman farmer can acquire agricultural land is with the permission and assistance of an adult male. The primary way that women acquire land is through their husbands upon marriage. However, it is important to note that in some communities custom dictates that if a husband wishes, he can 'reclaim' his wife's land and allocate her a different plot of land. In a feedback loop, this lack of tenure security made some women reluctant to make improvements to their farm plots, for fear their improved plots would be taken away from them.

Key Words:

Customary Land Tenure, Gender, Soybean, Ghana

Introduction

We present results from Phase II of the Gendered Equity and Land Tenure (GELT) focus groups^{1,2}, conducted in Ghana's Northern Region in 2018 to further investigate gender equity and customary land tenure systems among men and women smallholder soybean farmers. The Northern Region has some of the highest rates of poverty (22%), moderate-to-severe hunger (31%), and stunting among children under 5 years old (39%) in the nation (Zereyesus, Ross, Amanor-Boadu, & Dalton, 2014). These high rates suggest the need to increase the region's agricultural productivity in order to combat food insecurity and malnutrition among smallholder farming households.

The majority of land in the Northern Region is used for agricultural purposes and is informally held under customary tenure systems that vary across villages, districts, regions, and ethnic groups (Ragsdale, Rico Méndez & Read-Wahidi, forthcoming). The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) suggests that there is a need to “harmonize statutory and customary law” regulating land tenure as a means to increase economic growth in the agricultural sector, particularly for men and women smallholder farmers (USAID, 2013, p. 1). In 2003, Ghana's Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources launched phase two of the Land Administration Project (LAP-2), a long-term, multi-year initiative whose goal is to make these two systems more cohesive and complementary. Achieving this goal could have important socioeconomic payoff for the region, given that 1) conflicting land tenure systems can negatively impact economic activity in the agricultural sector, and 2) promoting secure land rights has been linked to improving economic empowerment and security – particularly for women farmers (World Bank, 2016).

In terms of gendered access to arable land in Ghana, a nationally representative household asset survey indicates that more than 83% of agricultural plots are individually owned/controlled by men, as compared to 10% by women (Deere, Oduro, Swaminathan, & Doss, 2013). However, data from this same survey indicates that gendered access to land is even more unbalanced in Ghana's Northern Region, where 95% of agricultural plots are individually owned/controlled by men (A. Oduro, personal communication, 16 March, 2017). This number is significant because an estimated 74% of adults in this region are engaged in agricultural production, primarily as smallholder farmers (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Such findings suggest a pressing need to address issues related to rural women's land rights as a means to improve

¹ The research is supported by the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Soybean Value Chain Research (Soybean Innovation Lab) under the U.S. Government's global hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future. Special thanks to the men and women smallholder farmers who gave of their time to participate in the focus group discussions and staff of Catholic Relief Services (CRS)/Ghana for assistance in conducting this research.

² The primary author assumes responsibility for the contents of this research paper.

living standards in agricultural communities in the region, where women farmers play a critical role in household food security and economic well-being.

In the phase II of this study on gendered land tenure, the research team is interested in investigating the effects of gender inequality within customary land tenure systems as they pertain to agricultural productivity among smallholder men and women soybean farmers in Northern Ghana. To do so, this work builds upon a new-institutional economics as developed in the works of Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 1990, 2000, 2007), aiming to understand collective action bounded by adaptive institutions under the assumption of rational individualism that ultimately can favor cooperative behavior. Understanding the institutional setting that affect women land rights is critical for this work. Specifically, our research instrument focuses on assessing gendered aspects on land acquisition, securing and controlling land rights, and traditions around land distribution among smallholder soybean farmers in Northern Ghana. This is the phase II of a preliminary study that aims to contribute to the literature on land tenure in rural Ghana by exploring the impacts of gender-biased customary land tenure on women farmers in the Northern Region. An in-depth understanding of the gender aspects of sociocultural and economic institutions pertaining to land tenure will further enhance the capacity to develop interventions to improve land access and security of tenure among women farmers in rural Ghana.

Literature Review

The development and consolidation of a legal framework for property rights requires a comprehensive assessment of the institutional factors that enable cooperation or conflict in land tenure systems. For the purpose of this manuscript, understanding the conditions that enable gender (in)equality is critical to develop interventions to improve land access and security of tenure among women farmers in rural Ghana. For example, Ostrom, Schoeder and Wynne (1993) suggest that the existence of hierarchical structures of governance (including those that put women in the bottom of the hierarchy), is one potential explanation of low investment in critical rural infrastructure. Their argument is that it creates perverse incentives to individuals participating in social arrangements in rural areas of developing countries, neglecting opportunities for economic and political development. This work will use new institutional economics lenses as means to analyze the role of social, economic and political institutions affecting land tenure in Northern Region in Ghana.

Although the legal framework in Ghana indicates that the country has a plural land tenure system, the predominant form is customary land tenure, where approximately 80 percent of land is own by traditional communities (i.e. stools, skins, families or clans), represented by the Supreme Chiefs or Council of Elders

(FAO, 2014). As means to improve the structure of property rights to stimulate economic development, reduce poverty and promote social stability, the national government of Ghana, supported by international organizations and donor countries, launched the Land Administration Project (LAP) in 2003 with the goal of harmonizing customary and common law (Ghana Land Administration Project 2, 2017). Despite these efforts, the results of the FAO's Legal Assessment Tool (LAT) for gender-equitable land tenure in Ghana suggest that although there has been significant improvements in the regulatory framework for equitable land tenure, women's land rights are still weak. Even though the country has advanced significantly towards the ratification of human rights instruments and have included constitutional provisions that prohibit gender-based discrimination, at the local level, the prevalence of customary systems still impacts women's land rights.

Understanding the role of norms and practices of a customary system on land tenure demands from us, putting aside our "modern/western lenses" for a moment. Customary regimes are not in and on themselves better or worse than statutory systems, they bear different outcomes for the members of their political community resulting from the interactions occurring in different cultural contexts where tradition and community are critical, compared to systems where the individual and the rule of law govern. The norm in rural Ghana, is the prevalence of customary law in which the traditional authority of the Chiefs of Council or Elders are central to determine land rights. But what do land rights mean in customary systems? Using the case of South Africa Bennet, Ainslie and Davis (2013) suggest that there is a difference between *land access* and *land control*, access is a function of the membership to the community, control is vested in and exercised by the customary political authority. Consistent with this definition, the results of Duncan and Brants' work in Ghana suggest that access to land "is the right to enter upon and use land. These rights are usufruct rights and can be granted to male and female members of the family, lineage or stool" (p. 18). Control over the land is defined as "one's ability to take decisions with regard to the land (e.g. to determine the size of land used for farming activities and whether the land will be used for food or cash crop production) and the ability to transfer land titles, whether by sale or inheritance (land ownership)" (Duncan & Brants, 2004, p. 18). Building upon these definitions "women have secondary access to land" and very little control over the land in Ghana (FAO, 2014). In spite of the improvements, state participation in land reform has not succeed generating equal rights to women, particularly in rural areas, where the tradition and religious law supersede the principle of equality before the law.

Recent attempts to harmonize customary and statutory systems in Africa have resulted in the inclusion of regulatory frameworks that in principle favor gender equality, illustrating the role of social and political institutions adapting to changing environments. Bennett, Ainslie and Davis (2013) suggest that traditional

authority is not as strong as it used to be in South Africa. Although land rights are still granted through community membership, the uneven and limited capacity of law enforcement is introducing important changes in the regulatory framework for land rights (Bennett, Ainslie, & Davis, 2013). On the other hand, an important incentive coming from the international demand of certain commodities -for which some African countries have a comparative advantage (e.g. cocoa, cashew nuts, coffee)-, is pushing for a change in the scheme of land rights. Empirical studies have found the evolution of traditional land tenure towards individualized rights when land owners have the ability to plant trees with high market demands (Otsuka, Suyanto, & Tomich, 1997; Quisumbing, Payongayong, Aidoo, & Otsuka, 2001a; Shepherd, 1991). A study from Ghana's Brong-Ahafo region describes the transition from community-based land rights to individual rights as a result of the increasing demand of cashew nuts, a case in which those who plant cashew trees are more likely to obtain individual land ownership (Evans, Mariwah, & Barima Antwi, 2015). Nonetheless, the impacts of this transition should be considered carefully as the individualization of land rights has the potential of reducing food security (because of the concentration on commodity production at the expense of food crops, critical for securing food in many rural communities in Africa) and creating inter and cross generational conflict. However, the lesson is that land rights evolve in a complex and changing social and community networks and therefore are fluid and in constant negotiation (Berry, 1997; Evans et al., 2015; Kushnick, Gray, & Jordan, 2014).

As agricultural land represents 69 percent of total land in Ghana (World Bank, 2014) and 73.7 percent of adults are engaged in agricultural production (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013), the land tenure structure has a significant impact on the national economy, particularly considering that agriculture represents 19.6 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Statista, 2016). In this context, the ultimate goal of Ghana LAP is to stimulate investment as a means to impulse economic growth, minimize poverty and reduce social conflict (Anafo, 2015, Ghana Land Administration Project 2, 2017). However, land reform in this context can "facilitate the acquisition of large hectares of land for commercial farming" (Anafo, 2015, p. 543) which may increase economic development but not necessarily lead to poverty reduction. In fact, Obeng-Odoom suggests that "establishing these legal frameworks has not, overall, translated into achievements in terms of broad socio-economic conditions of all classes" (Obeng-Odoom, 2015, p. 675), instead it has negatively affected the security of land tenure by increasing land disputes and speculation, guaranteeing land rights to elites, and encouraging unfair compensations for land. In the same line of thought, a comparative study by Levien (2017) suggests that rural land dispossession for economic purposes has negative impacts on women's rights. His work shows that under situations of land dispossession, rural women lack decision-making capacity, land rights and control over compensation,

and as enclosure of common resources occurs, women gets hurt by reducing their access to resources that allow them to produce food for the household (Levien, 2017).

Several empirical works in Africa illustrate the existence of insecure property rights for women, especially in rural areas, where religion, tradition, and division of labor affect the status of women. Despite the fact that women are in charge of securing food for the family, customary systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) frequently prevent women from inheriting land (Cooper & Bird, 2012). In fact, in this region “women usually have secondary usufruct access rights to land gained through their husband and/or father or other male relative” (Evans et al., 2015, p. 25). The fact that patriarchal structure dominates the land tenure systems affect the status and possibilities of equal development across genders (Deere et al., 2013; Duncan & Brants, 2004; Levien, 2017). The patriarchal structure enables the prevalence of polygamous households that affect women’s land rights (Archampong, 2010), This being the case, around 22 percent of women in Ghana are in polygamous marriages (Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). Outcomes from these marriage arrangements include the potential loss of the first wife’s land rights when the husband marries a second wife, or that access to land occurs almost exclusively through man (Archampong, 2010; Doss, 2002; Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). Results from our focus groups, will confirm this finding. Here, the contribution of Duflo’s (2012) work is significant for this discussion; what comes first, economic development or women empowerment? She suggests that although economic development is critical, it is not sufficient to produce gender equality, there is a need for policy to enable women’s decision making in environments dominated by patriarchal structures. Interventions that directly affect women engagement are critical to supplement economic development efforts.

Now, there are important aspects within traditional communities that directly affect women’s access and control of land, the division of labor is one of those. In SSA countries, the division of labor among men and women is crucial to understand land rights. The productive and reproductive functions are strongly gendered. Men are in charge of income generated crops, represent the family in public life, and head the decision-making at the household level; women are responsible for family care, growing food for the household, and most recently, generating additional income to sustain the household needs (Carr, 2008; Deere et al., 2013; Doss, 2002; Duncan & Brants, 2004, 2004; Evans et al., 2015; Levien, 2017). Given the division of labor it is expected a gendered variation in crop types, men are more likely to cultivate cash crops such as maize, whereas is more probable that women farm their own land for food crops, as they hardly can afford agricultural inputs or have the time to farm cash crops (Carr, 2008; Evans et al., 2015; Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). Another relevant aspect of this division of labor is the fact that in rural communities, women are more likely to use common pool resources to feed the family. As community lands are privatized the capacity of women to access these lands gets restricted, and therefore

their capacity to farm to feed the family gets limited (Anaafo, 2015; Levien, 2017). Also, research has shown that men and women play a different role in agricultural systems, therefore, evidence suggests “that we cannot simply lump agricultural producers together, regardless of gender, and hope to model their behaviors, land uses and crop choices in such a way as to gain meaningful information” (Carr, 2008, p. 901). Although Ghana has advanced significantly towards the development of a regulatory framework that enables gender equality in their land tenure system, the coexistence of statutory and customary systems, still limits the capacity of law enforcement to address issues of gender inequality. Given the gendered structure of labor, agricultural policies at the local level that address gender inequality seem necessary for women empowerment in agriculture.

Efforts towards modernization of land tenure systems are important to improve economic development, but the lack of gender perspective can potentially maintain the negative balance for women. Recent scholarly suggest that adapting the land regulatory framework for economic growth without considering gender issues can produce problems of food insecurity and maintain the same patterns of women exclusion of equitable land rights (De Schutter, 2011; Evans et al., 2015; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006; Levien, 2017; Yngstrom, 2002). Levien (2017) suggest that reforms that produce land dispossession can have a negative impact on food security because in rural communities, women use common pool resources to produce food and access to a network of information diffusion with their peers. As reforms transform access to resources and land, women see their capacity to farm and access to information restricted. Similarly, Anaafo (2015) indicates that “women farmers are adversely impacted by both customary and statutory land tenure systems” because access to land and other natural resources is still man-controlled (Anaafo, 2013, 2015). In this regard, the phenomenon of *land grabs* for commercial agriculture expanded through Africa can also impact women’s rights negatively because it usually consolidates the men’s control over land instead of encouraging equitable sharing with women (De Schutter, 2011; Evans et al., 2015; Levien, 2017; Yngstrom, 2002; Zoomers, 2010). Here, it is central to consider the importance of maintaining the balance between *economic development* and *women empowerment*. In the context of customary systems, where women decision-making is bounded by their status within and belonging to the community, as much as setting economic growth goals is important, incorporating a gender perspective in these goals as means to balance the development-empowerment equation is crucial too. Duflo recommends to introduce policies that directly impact women empowerment: “it will be necessary to continue to take policy actions that favor women at the expense of men, and it may be necessary to continue doing so for a very long time.” (Duflo, 2012, p. 1076).

Agriculture is one of the areas that affect women empowerment in rural areas, and therefore has the potential for policy interventions. This deals with the problems of access to agricultural inputs, stability of

land tenure, productivity, and access to markets. Empirical evidence suggest that more agricultural inputs like fertilizers, are used in men's farmland, therefore men's plots are much more productive than women's (Doss, 2002; Duflo, 2012; Goldstein & Udry, 2008).

In addition of concentration resources on the man's plot, women have low bargaining power within the household, affecting the capacity of efficiently pooling resources together to improve productivity. According to Duflo (2012), instead of cooperating in each other's plot by pooling inputs and labor together, they work separately. This imperfect negotiation within the household ultimately affects investment levels in Ghana. There are two examples of how the lack of cooperation can affect investment decisions: men working on the wife's land, and women's fallowing their lands. Under the first situation, by working continuously on the women's land, the husband will eventually claim ownership of her land and sooner or later will stop compensating her; "anticipating this, women are not ready to surrender control to their husbands even for compensation, and both members continue to produce in their own corners" (Duflo, 2012, p. 1069). In the second situation, land ownership for women is conditioned to the continuous utilization of the land, therefore women will fallow their land less than men do because they can be ejected during fallowing, making land use very inefficient for agriculture (Goldstein & Udry, 2008). In these cases, the position of women within the community affects access to agricultural inputs, productivity, and security of tenure.

Goldstein and Udry (2008) and Bennet et al. (2013) for the cases of Ghana and South Africa respectively, found that the security of land tenure is higher among individuals that hold positions of power within the community. This is consistent with Ubink and Quan's (2008) findings suggesting that the lack of accountability under customary rule in Ghana significantly affect land management and challenges the implementation of modern rules for land tenure, as they are combined with the traditional authority of chiefs and elders.

Although women still have secondary access and low control over land in SSA, there are significant efforts towards larger inclusion of women in agriculture not only to maintain household food security but for women's empowerment by increasing economic inclusion in the agricultural sector, a phenomenon that Lastarria-Cornhiel calls "feminization of agriculture" (2006). Overcoming the barriers produced by the status of women in traditional societies is a challenge. However, as the results of the phase I of our study showed the increasing awareness of the importance of women's land rights build upon the incentives of having additional income in the household, as means to solve the family problems such as children's education. This is a preliminary study that aims to contribute to the scant literature on land tenure in rural Ghana by exploring the impacts of gender-biased customary land tenure on women farmers

in the Northern Region. An in-depth understanding of the gender aspects of sociocultural and economic institutions pertaining to land tenure will further enhance the capacity to develop interventions to improve land access and security of tenure among women farmers in rural Ghana.

The Research Setting: Northern Region in Ghana

This qualitative study used a focus group research design to investigate gender and land tenure dynamics in rural communities in the Northern Region of Ghana. The Northern Region has some of the highest rates of poverty (22%), moderate-to-severe hunger (31%), and stunting among children under 5 years old (39%) in the nation (Zereyesus et al., 2014). The weak social and economic situation demand institutional efforts to increase opportunities for economic growth; in the context of strong agricultural vocation of the Northern Region, strategies could focus on improving agricultural production and productivity as a strategy for poverty reduction, affecting food insecurity and malnutrition among smallholder farming households.

In terms of gendered access to arable land in Ghana, a nationally representative household asset survey indicates that more than 83% of agricultural plots are individually owned/controlled by men, as compared to 10% by women (Deere, Oduro, Swaminathan, & Doss, 2013). However, data from this same survey indicates that gendered access to land is even more unbalanced in Ghana's Northern Region, such that 94.8 percent of agricultural plots are individually owned by men, 5.2 percent are individually owned by women, and less than one percent are jointly owned (A. Oduro, personal communication, 16 March, 2017). This number is significant because an estimated 74% of adults in this region are engaged in agricultural production, primarily as smallholder farmers (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013).

As mentioned in the review of the literature, the lack of gender perspective on land tenure modernization efforts can potentially maintain the negatively balance for women as it can harm food security at the household level, and maintain the patterns of exclusion for women. One of the incentives for this modernization is economic growth pushed by private investment in commercial agriculture (De Schutter, 2011; Zoomers, 2010). However, the conditions for large-scale investment in the Northern Region in Ghana are not in place, at least yet. Although, it is the larger region in the country, it has low population density, people is mostly dedicated to agriculture, primarily as smallholder farmers. The lack of external incentives for investing in commercial farming can be one of the reasons why the transition towards modern land tenure system lays behind, compared to other regions in the country. Given these conditions, the focus of our study is smallholder farmers.

For the current study, the research team is interested in investigating the effects of gender equity within customary land tenure systems as they pertain to smallholder men and women soybean farmers. For the

GELT Phase II, we conducted eight focus group discussions (N=101) – four women-only focus groups and four men-only focus groups – in four districts in the Northern Region where soybean is grown as both a cash crop and a subsistence crop. These sites include two villages each in the Districts of Chereponi, Karaga, Saboba, and Tolon. The focus groups were disaggregated by gender in order to encourage full engagement in discussions among all participants. Our research instrument focuses on assessing gendered aspects on land acquisition, securing and controlling land rights, and traditions around land distribution among smallholder soybean farmers in Northern Ghana. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the research project and later responded to a series of questions about land acquisition, securing and controlling land rights, and traditions around land tenure. As participants are not English speakers, researchers used the support of local translators. Each focus group session was audio recorded and later transcribed for analytic purposes. Researchers did not collect any identification data from the participants.

Results and Discussion

The research team conducted an in-depth analysis of the narratives resulting from the focus groups discussions. In this section, we present results clustered into four categories: 1) Access (right to enter and use) to land; 2) Secured land rights; 3) Control of land (the ability to make decisions of use and transfer); 4) Rules and traditions around land distribution. Since the focus groups were disaggregated by gender in order to encourage full engagement in discussions among all participants, when conducting that analysis, data was disaggregated into gender and community aiming at finding similarities and differences.

I. Access to land: gender differences acquiring the first plot

The analysis of focus groups illustrates the existence of two commonalities between groups regarding generational transfer of land.

Common across communities and gender:

1. Men do not purchase land, they inherited. As part of the tradition, the land passes in the lineage through the males.
2. Women get land through their husbands exclusively, except in Chirifoyilli, where women can also inherit land and get land from their brothers. In the rest of the communities, women cannot purchase land or receive payments for land.
3. As husbands provide the land for women, in the case of N-Nalong, the husband has to plow for the first time before giving it to the wife. It is common across the communities that the husband has to look for the land for the wife, if he does not have land available. For the first wife, men can

get land from their fathers, brothers, and the community elder. However, for the second wife, the men can also take land from the first wife (Shebo).

4. Regarding seeds for women the first time they acquired land, participants assert the husband will provide the seeds whether he has them or has to find them (Chirifoyilli and Shebo).

Differences across communities and/or gender:

1. In N-Nalong women and men narratives differ, according to women, men cannot receive land as a gift, whereas men assert they can receive land as a gift to use. The difference seems to be on the understanding of land use, for women, men can use somebody else's land but not receive it as a gift, whereas for men, this gift implies the use of the land.

a. Factors affecting access

Common across communities and gender:

1. Birthplace: Men have gain land rights because of their birthplace. In Sangbana, men can receive land even before getting married, but in Chirifoyilli, man can work his father's land but will only receive it after he marries. On the other hand, women usually lose their right to access to land if they marry outside their community (but can get it back from their brothers if they come back as in N-Nalong). This is important because most women marry outside their communities, and thus the only way for them to acquire land is through their husbands. However, women participants from Sangbana indicate that in some cases their family or clan may have some influence on their ability to access land in the family they married into.
2. Marital Connections: all the focus groups narratives coincide that the men will always provide land for farm to women, no matter how many wives he has. In Chirifoyilli, men participants state that the man and his wives will jointly farm the land. In Shebo, women participants indicate that men can have up to five wives and they are all rivals when it comes to issues like land.
3. Elder women: Elder women from all the communities will get the land her husband used to farm, except, it is her children the responsible for farming, she will help her children to farm, she will not doing by herself. In cases of divorce, land is taken from the woman and given to children.

Differences across communities and/or gender:

1. Divorce: In Sangbana, men and women narratives are different, according to women if they get divorce, the man takes the land back; but men indicate that if the woman gets old the land will not be taken from her even if she gets divorced.

First, males get the land from their fathers when the father knows he is ready to farm, and second the son takes over the land when the father no longer can farm. The inheritance from father to son is common among traditional communities, in the eight focus groups all the participants coincide that the son will receive the land from his father. The father checks, clean and then split the land into plots and then gives them to the children. However, if the father is not ready to stop working the land and/or the son is not ready to farm, father and son will farm together, and the father remains the head of the household. However, when the father is no longer capable of working because of his age or health, he fully transfers the land to his son and he will become the new head of the household.

In N-Nalong community, participants indicated that if the mother gets old, she can give the land to her male child, who can share the land with this wife. In exchange for this transfer of land, the son and his wife have the responsibility of caring for the mother. In Sangbana community female participants expressed that getting the land means “you are given the seeds to plant and take care of your family”. This is indicative of the women’s pride on farming and caring for the family. In the same community, male participants indicated that the land stays in the family by transferring it from father to son(s), in the same fashion, they indicated the existence of a landlord, who is an elder, who assigns the lands to the young male members of the community after examining if that young man is ready to farm. In Chirifollily community, male participants expressed that as the father gives the land to his child, he cannot leave the father alone by shifting plots, the son can beg for others but not for himself. These experiences narrated by the participants indicate the importance of family and community linkages, however the generational transfer of land occurs from man to man, and females do not seem to obtain land from their fathers, only through their husbands.

Considering the responses by gender, participant responses coincide in that the practice of generational transfer of land happens from father to son as part of the community tradition, the transfer is not only the physical access to land, but control over it, with an inherent capacity to become the family head. From the

focus groups it seems that the transfer starts in the 20's and complete control transferred around the 30's. When the father dies, the land is completely transferred to the son(s), not the daughter(s), the rationale underlying that decision is the fact that women do not use it to farm, only for food crops. Another commonality is the practice of begging in which a man on behalf of his wife or sons, beg for land to the elders, other members of the community, or even in other communities. Another common practice identified in the focus groups is that there is not generational transfer of land to the daughters, the only situation in which women can transfer land ownership is to her son, under the condition that he is going to take care of his mother.

II. Secured land rights: Are land rights secured across the board?

Common across communities and gender:

1. In N-Nalong, Chirifoyilli and Shebo, all participants assert they have secured land rights. According to participants, women's land tenure security derives from their marriage (no one can take the land from them because it was given by their husbands), and men from their family lineage. However, men in Chirifoyilli state, women do not have security of tenure because at any moment men can decide whether she can keep farming or not. Both, men and women participants from Sangbana indicate that men has secured land rights but women do not.
2. In N-Nalong, men cannot lose their land rights, they are guaranteed forever because the rights have been inherited. However, in the rest of the communities, men rights to land are attached to good behavior at the community. For instance, women from Shebo indicate that a man can lose their land if he beats his wife in the farm (it can be done in the house); however, men from the same community argue that men cannot lose land rights, except if the erosion washes out the topsoil. On the other hand, women's rights are more vulnerable. Women can lose their land rights if they marry outside their clan, if the husband dies and she decides to leave, if they get divorced, if the husband marries a second or third wife, the first has to divide her land, if she is not strong enough for farming adequately, even if the husband dies, she can lose the land rights.
3. In general, participants assert that breaking the community rules will prevent both men and women from land rights. For instance, men participants from N-Nalong indicate that breaking the rules has consequences, like farming on a day that they are not supposed to can take the right to farm from them. In Chirifoyili, women must demonstrate they behave good with their husbands and they are also good farmers and can get enough to provide the family and support the husband, otherwise she can lose the right to the land. In Shebo, norms stablish that men can lose their land if they have sexual intercourse in their land.

a. Rights attached to control of land

1. Women can: In N-Nalong, farm (including the decision about what crops to grow), fallow, use agricultural inputs, graze animals, use resources from the land. In Sangbana, farm, fallow, use inputs, graze animals, use resources from the land (except for cutting trees down), bequeath to her children (only inside the village). In Chirifoyili, farm (including the decision about what crops to grow), fallow (but has to inform the husband that she wants let the land fallow, and if the husband wants to farm the land she wants to fallow, she has to allow it), fertilize after the husband has granted permission (no one can take the land from her after she has fertilized it), graze animals, bequeath (only to her children). In Shebo, all the farming decisions go through the husband, the woman has to consult with her husband what crops to grow (what he says, she grows), the husband provides the land, fertilizers, seeds, there is crop rotation (they do not let the land fallow), graze animals, get sheanut for their farms. According to men participants in Shebo, there are not situations in which women can control land.
2. Women cannot: In N-Nalong, sell, lease, bequeath (inheritance is only through the man), use the land as a collateral for a loan. In Sangbana, sell, lease. In Chirifoyili, sell, lease. In Shebo, cannot cut trees for charcoal, sell, lease.
3. Men can: In N-Nalong, let land go to fallow, graze animals, use resources for farming, use agricultural inputs, lease the land (cannot give land as a gift or sell land outside the village). In Sangbana, farm, let the land go fallow, use agricultural inputs and fertilizer, lease or sell (even outside the village granted the permission by the elder), bequeath (only inside the village). In Chirifoyili, farm, let the land go fallow, put fertilizer, graze animals, use resources from the land, lease (inside and outside the village), give the land to someone inside the village, when they have trees on their farm and someone cuts the trees, they can chase the person away, grow sheanuts, provide firewood. In Shebo, farm, use fertilizer (if they have it), graze animals, grow sheanuts (but they don't like to use the charcoal because it causes infertility of the land)
4. Men cannot: In Chirifoyili and Shebo, sell the land (only chiefs can sell the land), give the land outside the village, sell the land outside the village.
5. Joint control of land: Only in Chirifoyili, women have joint control of land: sell, inheritance, gift, payment, use as a collateral for loan.

III. *Control of Land: Who gets what and what does with it?*

In order to analyze how access and control of land occurs, the experiences narrated by the participants are structured around gendered transfer and access to land, and the role of traditional authority in land allocation. As the generational transfer of land indicated, land is passed from father to sons, where the

elders and traditional authority are critical in the assignment of plots. In this context, the role of men is representing the household in aspects such as begging for land internally and externally.

Given the prominence of tradition in these communities, women's access to land is determined by marriage not lineage. An important practice among these communities is the limited ability of women to change their plots after they have gotten them, instead access to land is guaranteed by their ability to farm continuously, therefore, women's land can be less fertile than men's. There is also a generalized idea that women rights to the land are good because that can improve food and cash crops for sustaining the family.

In N-Nalong community, women participants acknowledged that men have the land bargaining power within the community. And that the mother can give land to her male son if she cannot farm anymore and he is ready to farm, so he can take care of her. In the case of Sangabana community, there seems to be a contradiction in the narrative of participants, on one side, both male and female participants agree that “the land belongs to the woman”, however, there are embedded cultural practices such a polygamy that allow the husband to remove access to land to the first wife to give it to the second, preventing women from the security of tenure. Participants indicate that under the assumption that the land is abundant and the first wife has enough to share, or is not farming all her land, she (the first wife) can share her land with the second wife. In this case, fallowing may be a practice that allows husbands to remove access to land from their wives. In Chirifollilly community, women participants suggest that it is hard not having rights to the land because only their husband can beg others for farm land. In fact, they said that land is not enough to pass it to women, before she gets it can be too late to effectively use the land (land has been overused). In this community, the underlying argument is that women do not have cash crops, only food crops, therefore, there is no need to improve women land rights.

An important aspect of access and control of land is tradition and community values. There are few highlights from each community. In N-Nalong community, men participants hold an interesting discussion about merit versus belonging to the community as the basis to give land to the male children. A set of the participants indicate that land should be given to the children that are capable and willing to work on the land, this narrative is challenged by another set of participants who suggest that even if not all the children are qualified or are willing to farm, the father should share equally among his male children, as means to avoid internal conflict in the family and community, one participant asserts “give different amounts of land to different children (men) may cause conflicts.” In fact, in this community, land conflict resolution is verbal, according to the participants. Therefore, that strong sense of community supersedes individuals, particularly women: “she can/should even offer her land to other in the

community that may need land." Related to this community belonging and family values, in Chirifollily community, as the father gives the land to his son, he cannot leave the father to farm alone, if he takes the land, he also takes the responsibility of the family and its members.

Now, let's consider the shared perspectives by men and women on access and control of land. As mentioned, land is assigned by the elders. Elders occupy a central role in traditional communities, as the leaders of the community and guardians of the land, they are wise enough to decide land allocation within the community, "so everybody who wants to farm will have some land to do so". As the elder takes care of the community, the father takes care of the family and divides the land among its members. In N-Nalong community, there is the assumption among the members of the community that the land is abundant; therefore, there are no conflicts for land, plus, "everybody knows where their land ends." This is a significant difference with Sangbana community, where land is not abundant. Therefore, every member of the community can get a share of the land but the size of the plots should be big enough to allow farming but not that big that would restrict access to another member of the community. In fact, the size of the plot depends on how much you are capable of farming; it is negotiated with the elder when he is going to assign the plot. Considering the issue of productivity, plots can be changed if they are not being productive (i.e. if the soil is not good). In the case of Chirifollily all the land is the same so the location does not matter. However, the old fathers assign the plots. The criterion for changing the plot is different in this community than in Sangbana, plots can be shifted but in that situation, the man would have to go far away from the initial plot assigned. That condition makes begging for land a critical aspect of access.

As far as considerations about gender and land tenure, in N-Nalong community, the husband divides his land with his wives, and if the land is not enough, the father can give his son more, so he can share it with his wife. An important statement from women participants in N-Nalong is "land is the man's matter, not a women's matter". It defines clearly the capacity to control land in this community. The husband takes care of the land allocation, has to beg for land for his wife, if her land is no longer fertile, or if he gets a second or third wife. According to the women in this focus group, "women do not face the challenges of searching and negotiating the land, that is the husband's problem." In contrast with this statement, men argue that woman owns her land as long as she farms it. Again the challenge of this type of ownership is "what does as long as she farms it means". In the case of Sangbana, the husband divides his land with his wives, but husband and wives do not have to share the land equally. That means size plots of men are usually higher than women's, and if for instance the first wife was given one hectare, she may have to split it with the second wife. Although land does not have to be shared equally, produce from farming can be shared and are considered part of the household. The conception about equality of land rights is

challenging, although in this community, participants indicate that “land cannot be taken from a woman”, “she has the right to the land. Man should collect the land and give it to the woman. He will not take it from her. The land BELONGS to her” conflict with statements such as “her plot can be shifted, just shifted for some comparable piece of land,” or “women's plot can be shifted to let the plot rest or crop something else” knowing that fallowing can affect women access to land as the condition for farming is “as long as she farms.” The situation is very similar in Chirifollily community. A relevant aspect of the discussion about women land rights is the fact seems to be a common place that participants think that women rights to the land are good because they are the responsible for feeding the family. Historically women did not farm but now they do. Through farming, women can help to manage the family problems.

IV. Division of Labor: Divided among productive and reproductive functions

The division of labor among rural communities is a key factor understanding the structure of land tenure. Women are traditionally at and in charge of the household, whereas men are responsible for representing the household in public matters, such as begging for land or cleaning land for the children. In this regard, the focus groups allowed confirming the strict division of the reproductive function hold by women and the productive by men. Women use the land to feed the family, or to get some additional income to cover the family needs such as sending the children to school. Therefore, women have traditionally took care of food crops and have put less attention on cash crops. However, soybean seems to start making a difference allowing women to combine a crop that allows them to obtain foodstuffs and some cash. Another important issue related to the division of labor is the “age” and “farming capacity” as the basis to start farming. The combination of age, gender, and farming capacity become obstacles for women to control land. An interesting highlight from the community comparison illustrates that in Sagbana community, the yield of the woman's plot belongs to her, not to her husband. But at the same time, that yield is used to sustain the family. In this community, women insist that they feel pride on farming, because it allows them to upbringing their families.

V. Challenges of Farming Soybean: similar concerns, different challenges

The majority of participants in the focus groups had soybean crops in the last season. That allowed us to understand the critical challenges faced by women and man soybean farmers. Nevertheless, challenges vary by gender. The first challenge for women in N-Nalong community is that extension agents from the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MOFA) are available for men mostly. MOFA agents are critical for technology transfer and access to inputs like inoculum; participants from Sangbana and Chirifollily communities highlight the importance of having extension agents available. Another critical issue for

soybean farmers is access to agricultural inputs, and even more critical for women. According to women participants from N-Nalong, since “men are the custodians of the land”, and represent them in the public life, one way for women to get access to agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, is through their husbands. But it is not only a matter of who is the representative of the household in the public life, but how to purchase those inputs? An alternative discussed in the same community is access to microloans through women SILK (microloan) groups. They can get microloans to purchase fertilizers or pesticides that the women’s crops require. Significantly, access to land is one of the most critical factors for women in farming not only food but cash crops, like soybean. As the literature review indicated, and the discussion around access and control showed, women access to land can be in many cases late, when the land is no longer fertile; or the community condition to farm continuously, does allow women to fallow their land because they are at risk of losing access, affecting the quality of the land. In addition, in the participant communities, women are supposed to “own” the land, but that means access and not control. The cultural norm of polygamy can seriously affect women access to land and in that way, it can create a perverse incentive to not invest time, effort, and financial resources for cash crops. And these challenges add to the fact that smallholder farming in this region is supported rain fed systems, making productivity depending upon the climatic conditions year-round and the fertility of the land.

Specifically, to the challenges of farming soybean, there are coincidences between men and women farmers. In general, participants know what inoculum is, know that it can enhance the yield, but agree that it is hard to get or do not know how to get access to it. In terms of planting, farmer’s concerns are regarding the difficulty of planting in rows, both men and women suggest that only when MOFA agents bring ropes, they can better plant. During harvesting, one of the problems is not having gloves because they can cut your hands easily. And the threshing is hard because they have to use a stick and they do not have tarpaulin that would help them to protect from the debris. In addition to the farming challenges, sometimes productivity is not as good as expected or prices are too low because everybody is harvesting. Adding to these challenges face by men and women farmers, women participants pointed out the difficulties of harvesting with children.

Nevertheless, participant farmers express a positive sentiment towards farming soybean. They said “soy crops can be profitable and the yield is good”, those are outcomes that can happen with appropriate access to agricultural inputs, which can turn soybean farming into a good food and economic alternative for farmers and household members. All the groups but one of women said they save some seeds from the current to the next season. The group that indicated they do not save the seeds said: “sometimes women want to save some seeds for the next season but because of the problems in the household, they have to sell it all and sometimes the prices are not good.” Pressures at the household could be another constrain

for women to effectively use their resources for farming. All the groups indicated that soya is becoming widely used for foodstuffs, that children and adults have incorporated it nicely in their diets.

Conclusion

For the current study, the research team investigated the effects of gender equity within customary land tenure systems as they pertain to agricultural productivity among smallholder men and women soybean farmers. The research team used new institutional economic lenses to understand the conditions that enable gender inequality. Results of this work illustrate the role of social, economic and political institutions affecting land tenure among men and women soybean farmers in Northern Region in Ghana.

The majority of land in Ghana is used for agricultural purposes and is informally held under customary tenure systems that vary across villages, districts, regions, and ethnic groups. Previous work from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2013) suggests that there is a need to “harmonize statutory and customary law” (p. 1) as a means to increase economic growth in the agricultural sector—particularly among men and women smallholder farmers. The national government of Ghana started the Land Administration Project in 2003 with the goal of harmonizing these systems, which can sometimes be in conflict and can negatively impact economic activity in the agricultural sector. Indeed, the overlap between customary and statutory land tenure systems has important gender implications as the literature review and results showed. There is a pressing need to address issues related to women’s land rights in Ghana as means to improve living standards in rural communities, where women farmers play a critical role in household food security and economic well-being of the household as the focus groups indicated.

Previous studies of land tenure in other regions of Ghana indicate that, under current customary tenure systems, women farmers’ rights to land are fragile when compared to that of men (Doss, 2002; Kuusaana, Kidido & Halidu-Adam, 2013; Lambrecht, 2016; Quisumbing, Payongayong, Aidoo & Otsuka, 2001; Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). This was confirmed in the analysis of focus groups. Although gender-based discrimination in land tenure is constitutionally prohibited in Ghana, national regulations that have been adapted in deference to customary land tenure systems can inhibit the protection of women farmers’ rights to access and secure land. We found that, consistent with Richardson and Gaafar (2016), “Women’s land rights are more insecure than men’s in the Northern Region” (p. 5), given that the primary way a woman farmer can acquire agricultural land is with the permission and assistance of a man, often either a father, brother or husband. We also found that land tenure insecurity may be further heightened for women farmers in the Northern Region by the interplay of common yet complex cultural practices, such

as plot allotment and polygamy. For example, participants in both men's and women's focus groups reported that men are typically allocated larger plots as compared to their wives. Men then apportion approximately one-quarter of their allotment to a first wife. However, when a husband takes a second wife, the first wife may be required to share her plot allotment with the second wife.

Our findings suggest that the prevalence of polygamous households may have an important yet understudied impact on land tenure security among women farmers. Further, despite variations in language, religion, district and ethnicity, a general consensus among the focus group participants is that customary tenure can deeply impact women's agricultural decision making. That is, women farmers with limited resources have less economic incentive to invest expensive agricultural inputs (e.g., fertilizer) and other resources into their farm plots when that land may be taken from them without recourse. And in a feedback loop, land tenure insecurity may inhibit women farmers' ability to secure economic resources (e.g., loans) to purchase agricultural inputs when lenders know that women can lose the land. In fact, the lack of control of financial resources at the household level and the need of husband's consent to apply to loans is an issue among other African countries with customary land tenure systems that negatively impact women farmers' ability to secure loans for economic development purposes (African Development Bank, 2016; Kimani, 2008).

Our findings add to the scant body of research that suggest that enhancing land tenure security for women farmers in Northern Ghana can play a critical role in improving agricultural productivity in the region. These results may be applied to other countries and regions in sub-Saharan Africa with similar systems of customary land tenure that are gender-biased in favor of men farmers.

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