

OWNING FOOD: THE IMPACT OF LIVING IN MALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS ON WOMEN'S FOOD
SECURITY – A CASE STUDY OF THE KUMBUNGU DISTRICT IN NORTHERN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, the WFP conducted a food vulnerability survey in districts of northern Ghana. The report identified female-headed households in the region as the most vulnerable in terms of food insecurity - 38% of households headed by women had the highest risk of food shortage. Considering that women head only 5% of households in the northern region, the WFP food vulnerability report failed to account for the food security situation of women living in male-headed household, who constitute the majority household make-up in the region. It also created the impression that living in male-headed household reduced women's vulnerability of food insecurity. This study applies feminist theories and methodology to critically evaluate the food security situation of women living in male-headed households in northern Ghana. It investigates how living in male-headed households impacts women's access to and control over their nutritional needs, while also examining the socio-cultural factors that undermine equal access to and control over farmlands and food harvests in male-headed households in the North.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
GAG	Gender Asset Gap
GMO	Genetically Modified Organisms
MoFA	Ministry of Food and Agriculture
PE	Political Ecology
WFP	United Nations World Food Program

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

In 2012, the World Food Program (WFP) conducted a food vulnerability survey across the agricultural districts of northern Ghana. The report noted that patriarchy and gender inequality have implications on individuals' access to and control over food in the North. It identified female-headed households in the region as particularly vulnerable to hunger given that women are less likely to adequately access the agricultural resources that are means for subsistence. In fact, 38% of households headed by women were said to be at the highest risk of food shortage (WFP, 2012). But given that women head only 5% of households in the northern region, the WFP food vulnerability report failed to account for the food security situation of most women living in the region – those in male-headed households (Statistics Service of Ghana, 2016). It also did not give details of how socio-cultural factors such as polygamy and larger family size in male-headed households may impact women's access to and control over food. This study examines the gender dynamics of hunger with attention to polygamy and larger (extended) family households, where the practice of “one man multiple wives” create an additional level of inequality amongst women in the male headed households.

This study was designed to apply feminist theories and methodology to critically evaluate the food security situation of women living in male-headed households in northern Ghana. It seeks to investigate how living in male-headed households impacts women's access to and control over their nutritional needs, while also examining the socio-cultural factors that undermine equal access to and control over farmlands and food harvests in male-headed households in the North.

My interest in digging deeper into the WFP report stems largely from my own personal experiences with poverty and food insecurity in northern Ghana. I was born in Libga, a small subsistence farming community in the northeastern part of Ghana, close to the border with Burkina

Faso. It is a village of about 700 people, occupying land size of approximately 70 acres. Women in my community, like in most countries in the world, play crucial roles in community agriculture and food production, which are the main sources of subsistence for households and families. However, in the past decade, persistent drought and inconsistent weather have gravely affected farm yields, leaving most households with barely enough to eat. In the case of most women in villages like mine, gender inequality and patriarchal hegemony have aggravated their struggle to meet daily nutritional needs. Their access to community agrarian resources such as farmland is inhibited by a combination of poorly structured agricultural systems, incoherent land tenure regimes and patriarchal cultural practices. Having been raised in a male-headed household myself, I noticed the WFP report missed an important dimension on the experiences of women who live in households where men dominate decision-making.

To fill this gap, I set out to answer the following research question: how do gendered household relations in Northern Ghana impact access to, and control over the resources of agrarian production, and ultimately food security? In answering this broad question, the study also answered three key sub-questions, namely, 1) Who owns and control the farmlands which produce harvests for household food needs 2) What relationship exists between the control of household agricultural resources and the control of household food 3) How do social relations in male-headed households affect women's access to and control over food?

The threat of food insecurity to Ghana's population is well documented. In December 2016, Ghanaian officials and policymakers attending a national Farmers Day celebration in Accra decried the threat of food insecurity to the nation and promised appropriate measures to mitigate its ramifications on the country's population. The country's major online news source, the Ghana News Agency, quoted an official of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) as

saying that food production had declined considerably, and that the country's food security effort had failed (GNA 2015). The WFP has listed Ghana as one of the most food insecure countries in Africa (WFP 2012). About 1.2 million people, representing 5 percent of Ghana's population, are categorized as food insecure. Thirty four percent (34%) of the population live in Upper West region, followed by Upper East with 15% and Northern region with 10%, totaling approximately 453,000 people (MoFA, 2016). Up to 1.5 million people vulnerable to food insecurity live in the rural and urban areas of the remaining seven regions, with the largest share of them in Brong-Ahafo (11%), in Ashanti (10%), followed by Eastern (8%) and the Volta region (7%) (MoFA, 2016). Given that this food shortage puts many Ghanaians at the risk of hunger, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) and non-governmental organizations such the WFP, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Action Aid Ghana and others have begun several initiatives at both regional and national levels to assuage the situation.

The WFP currently implements six major projects within the area of food security, including: providing school meals to about 100,000 pupils in some of the most food-insecure communities, nutritional support to children under five suffering from acute malnutrition, and a program to foster community resilience in areas most vulnerable to food security (WFP 2015). Today, WFP is reaching 122,000 children in 304 schools (Baafi, 2010). The food provides an incentive for children to attend school, but more importantly, the meals are vital for improving children's health. The Ministry of Agriculture has for the past decade initiated several projects – the Block Farm Program, the Northern Rural Growth Program, and the Promotion of Perennial Crops project – all designed to reduce the food deficit (MoFA 2015). Through these programs, improved seeds, fertilizer, herbicide and tractor services are provided to farmers who pay the total amount involved in kind after harvesting. There are organized small-scale farmer groups who have

their farms in one location (block). The program was initiated by the government to support farmers to increase production to ensure food security, generate employment in rural communities especially among the youth, and increase incomes of small farm households. The target crops include rice, maize, soybean and sorghum, which are the main staples for most Ghanaian households. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) has also set up a storage system – the National Food Buffer Stock Company (NAFCO) – to ensure food security and to insulate farmers against losses resulting from anticipated increases in production (MoFA, 2017).

With these concerted efforts, the potential for increased food production is likely, but that will by no means guarantee adequate access to and control over food for every Ghanaian, given the country's complex social dynamics, especially in the North where patriarchal social structures and family systems create different realities for individuals. For most marginalized groups in the North, increased availability of food is in fact no guarantee that their nutritional needs will be adequately satisfied even when the harvest boom eventually happens. Their skepticism is fueled by the fact that the various interventions do not consider or address the gender inequality in access to and control over agricultural resources such as land, seeds and ultimately farm harvests. Initiatives like the WFP hunger vulnerability report which considers gender as a dimension of hunger, sometimes commit the remiss of homogenizing the experiences of women without paying attention to the fact that women's experiences may vary in communities and households, depending on the prevailing cultural regimes or norms that underpin social relations. Finding a sustainable solution to women's vulnerability to hunger in the North requires the appreciation of the socio-cultural conditions that undermine their access to and control over the agricultural resources that are crucial to the process of food production and its consumption. Again, all the initiatives mentioned above focus on the scale of population, community, household, but ignore

how increased food production is allocated within the household. As Patel (2012) puts it, giving away food does little to address the underlying causes of disempowerment that leads to hunger.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

My goal in this study is to provide further details about the gender dynamics of food security in Northern Ghana, with a focus on intra-household dynamics. The scholarship on gender and food security tends to focus on the household as the unit of analysis. Not many details exist about the realities of individual members of households, although it is a settled matter that individuals' social positions in households produce different realities for them in terms of the distribution and access to various resources available to households. The 2012 WFP Food Vulnerability survey is an example of the overemphasis on the household as the primary unit of analysis and the problems inherent in that approach to understanding how households work in northern Ghana.

The report assumes that every member of a household has the same experience and thus misses out on the valuable lessons to be learned from the experiences of some women whose insignificant social status in households produce different realities that have implications on their ability to participate in the household food production and distribution systems. It is my hope this study sheds light on the individual realities of women living in male-headed households, whose food security situation was not featured in the WFP report. The study further reveals the unique experiences of some of the women whose households are polygamous, as the practice of "one man multiple wives" creates another level of inequality among women in the male headed households.

This study brings a feminist perspective to the important subject of food security, which has attracted significant attention in development scholarship, and also introduces the polygamy

question which appears to have escaped the attention of scholars and development practitioners. As men in northern Ghana are likely to marry more than one wife, the men and multiple women compete to access or control the farmlands through which food is produced to feed their households. The patriarchal culture of the region imbues men with power and gives them control over the allocation household resources. But it also creates a hierarchical order amongst women, where a first wife has better access to or control over agricultural resources than perhaps the second wife. The second wife in turn has better access than other wives next to her. The unequal access to and control over household agricultural resources results in similar inequalities in access to and control over food, where household members' ability to access or control the household food stock is determined by their level of access to and control over the farmlands that feed the family food stock. This study therefore moves forward the current knowledge on the gender dynamics of food security in northern Ghana by offering a nuanced analysis of polygamous dynamics and how they shape access to food differently for individual household members. If this important issue is not given a significant attention in the academic and policy discussions on food security, a broken system would be patched up to reinforce patriarchal hegemony and gender inequality, which are the root causes of food insecurity for women in northern Ghana.

DEFINING FOOD SECURITY

In 1974, a growing concern about hunger and malnutrition in many parts of the world brought world leaders together at the first ever World Food Conference to deliberate on how to prevent an impending global food shortage and the hunger crisis it would cause. These world leaders were worried that the global agricultural system at that time lacked the capacity to meet future food needs, and ideas were needed urgently to forestall what looked like an impending hunger crisis on a larger scale. A proclamation was made at the conference that "every man,

woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition to develop their physical and mental faculties," (FAO, 2015). The leaders attending the conference had set as their goal to eradicate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all forms within a decade. A follow up declaration by world leaders at a 1996 Food Summit in Rome succinctly captured the nucleus of the food crisis and the aspirations of the global action to reduce hunger:

We consider it intolerable that more than 800 million people throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. This situation is unacceptable. Food supplies have increased substantially, but constraints on access to food and continuing inadequacy of household and national incomes to purchase food, instability of supply and demand, as well as natural and man-made disasters, prevent basic food needs from being fulfilled ... We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015 (Rome Declaration, 1996)

Little did those world leaders know that by the year 2017, hunger and malnutrition would still be devastating populations around the globe, as recent famines, such as the one in northern Nigeria, Ethiopia and South Sudan, continue to force people to flee their homes in search of food. The United Nations WFP estimates that 1 in 7 people in the world go to bed hungry each night (WFP, 2016). In fact, hunger is the world's number one health risk; it kills more people every year than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined (WFP, 2016). In developing countries, almost five million children under the age of five die of malnutrition-related causes every year, according to a 2016 report of the FAO (FAO, 2016). The areas most affected are highlighted in figure 1 below.

2015 global hunger index by severity



Figure 2 – 2015 Global Hunger Index by severity (Source: The Washington Post)

People are considered food secure when they have availability and adequate access at all times to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life. The most popular definition of the concept is the one offered by the United Nations World Food Program. It considers a combination of three key elements. The first element is food availability, which requires that food must be available in sufficient quantities and on consistent basis. The second is food access, where individuals can regularly acquire adequate quantities of food through subsistence, purchase, barter or aid. The third is food utilization, where individuals can consume food in a way that generates positive nutritional outcomes. These three elements must be met concurrently for one to be considered food secured (WFP, 2017).

Various countries have worked with the WFP, FAO and other non-governmental organisations to achieve these three elements of food security, but only a few, mostly in developed countries have succeeded in the endeavour. Although places like Europe, North America and South-East Asia have increased per capita food production, other areas such as Africa and the Middle East have experienced significant decline in per capita food production in the past 50 years (Dyson, 1999). The 2007 – 2008 global food crisis underscored the need to reform the structures that regulate food production and distribution across the globe. Different populations encountered problems with food in different forms – rising cost, safety and, malnutrition, food safety and security. These problems highlighted the failure of the agricultural system to mitigate poverty and hunger,(Wittman et al., 2010:3).

The failure to achieve the 1996 Rome Declaration coupled with the increasing global inequality in access to and control over food and rising food prices culminated in scepticism about the potential of the global food security project. In fact, grass root movements comprising peasants, small-scale farmers, farm workers, and indigenous communities – constituting a new wave of food activism called ‘Food Sovereignty’ – “no longer saw potential in the concept of food security to ensure local access to culturally appropriate and nutritious food” (Wittman et al., 2014: 2). The scepticism was occasioned by concerns that the hidden political and economic powers were hijacking the global food system to make profit out of it at the expense of the health and safety of food consumers. The World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other transnational organizations, critics argued, used the international political and economic structures to promote a market, industrial and agro-technological approach to food production and significantly determined how food is produced, distributed and consumed across the globe, a situation seen as detrimental to the interest of food consumers.

At a separate Food Summit held in 2007 at Nyeleni in Mali, the food sovereignty group led by the South American peasant group La Via Campesina called for a new direction towards achieving global food security. In their view, the best possible way to guarantee adequate and culturally appropriate food was to promote local self-sufficiency by reducing the influence of capitalism, and supporting local agricultural systems instead. A new declaration was made in Nyeleni to capture this vision:

Food sovereignty is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations ... Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets, and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture (Nyeleni Declaration, 2007).

Indeed, as Agarwal (2014: 1250) notes, the global power inequity influence how the business of food export and imports is transacted in the international food regime. In 2008, North America and Europe alone accounted for 65% of the global cereal export (Wittman, 2012). This kind of concentration leaves populations in poor countries over-dependent on exported food and distorts the market of local farmers, while at the same time making the poor countries vulnerable in situations of price fluctuation as experienced in 2007 – 2008.

Yet it must also be noted that some developing countries do not have the capital investments, infrastructure and the good climatic conditions necessary to practice local self-sufficiency. Such countries face the risk of not being able to produce food enough to meet the nutritional needs of people. Neoliberal globalization and advocates of food trade argue that exporting surplus food to poor parts of the world fits well into the food security agenda. This argument is particularly appropriate in the case of poor countries that genuinely cannot produce adequate food to feed their populations as a result of famine or other circumstances beyond their

ability to overcome. Agarwal succinctly lays the potential contradiction in balancing local-sufficiency with the need to export food to places where it is genuinely needed:

[...] the effort by nation states to attain self-reliance has some relevance in the wake of the 2007 – 2008 world food crises and the overdependence of many (especially Southern) countries on others (especially Northern countries) for their food security; although the balance of imports and home production would need to be worked (Agarwal, 2014: 1249)

Thus, Agarwal (2014) does not rule out the possibility of allowing food imports to complement domestic production where necessary. This may be a short-term solution to the food crisis in places like Zimbabwe, Somalia and Ethiopia, although still inadequate to guarantee the food security of marginalized social groups, like women in some parts of Africa who have been found in several studies to be vulnerable because of gender inequality in accessing and controlling agro-ecological resources. Understanding hunger and malnutrition requires an examination of what systems and institutions hold power over food (Patel, 2012: 2). Moreover, La Via Campesina and advocates of local-sufficiency are primarily concerned with the trade-deficit and undemocratic nature of the current international food regime. Their focus is to regulate the activities of the agro-corporations that control the food trade system and to protect local markets and peasant farmers in poor countries. The potential shortfall of ‘local-sufficiency’ principle is its tendency to generalize the categorization of farmers and farm workers as victims of corporate exploitation, without providing a distinction between large-scale and small-scale farmers, or between farm owners and landless farms, who may have varying experience of the present agrarian regime.

The success of local-sufficiency and food sovereignty in general hinges on the possibility of local farmers to access land, an important factor in the food production process. As Borras Jr. et al. put it: “In settings where land-based wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of domestic and global elites, without resolving the question of land property relations in favour of

rural poor communities, food sovereignty will not be able to take off at all' (2010: 107). Thus, local farmers need to have effective access to and control over land resources by way of direction of what to produce on it, and how the produce is distributed. In many developing countries and places, like in northern Ghana, where subsistence remains the way of life, access to land defines the food situation of households. Even for city dwellers, access to cheap and healthy local food depends on land availability for local farmers, a result of which makes land rights an important part of the Nyeleni declaration:

[Food sovereignty] ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food (Patel, 2009: 674).

As Borras Jr. et al observe, the increasing interest in land by agro-business, corporations and chemical companies and some powerful countries looking to produce food and biofuel poses a significant threat to farmlands, especially in developing countries. In 2009, the corporation Biofuel Africa Ltd. acquired over 23,700 hectares of land in northern Ghana, forcing seven villages – all of them farming communities – out of their farmlands. The takeover was facilitated by the government of Ghana working with local tribal chiefs, who have customary rights over land in the region. For circumstances like these, Boras et. al. (2012) suggest redistributive land policies that will reform land-based social relations and enable the rural poor to have access and effective control over land resources.

The problem with this suggestion is that, it is almost a remote possibility for it to result in any meaningful change in places like northern Ghana, because the people mandated by the laws of Ghana to lead such an exercise are the same chiefs whose actions are guided by patriarchal traditional norms. Advocating land rights for local farmers in such a homogenous manner obscures local power dynamics such as social class, gender and, in the case of most parts of Africa, ethnic

affiliations that may produce different outcome for farmers in term of access to and control of available farmlands. Any meaningful land reforms must also address the varying categories and inherent privileges and disadvantages of farm owners, farm workers, women and other marginalized social categories.

WOMEN AND FOOD SECURITY

The issue of women's vulnerability to hunger especially in patriarchal societies has attracted significant attention in contemporary literature on global agricultural systems and food security. Amartya Sen's 1981 publication, "Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation" was one of the original contributions which shifted our understanding on hunger from a problem of food scarcity to that of power and social relations within and among societies. Sen argued that systemic inequality in access to and control over resources must be addressed if genuine food security is to be guaranteed, especially for vulnerable groups (Sen, 1981). The British-American food activist and scholar Raj Patel and a host of other scholars subsequently repeated this argument, variously highlighting race, class, ethnicity and gender as integral part of the problem of hunger in many parts of the world. Patel (2012) echoed Sen's argument that contemporary approaches to fighting hunger ignores the politically difficult questions of inequality in power that produces food insecurity for many vulnerable populations. He went on to note: "a broken system would be patched up with entitlements" if unequal access to and control over agrarian resources is not simultaneously addressed (Patel, 2012). At the heart of the problem is access to and control over farmlands, which is crucial for food production and subsistence, especially in underdeveloped parts of the globe.

In 2008, at Fifth International Conference in Mali, Maputo, La Via Campesina launched a campaign with the slogan, "Food sovereignty means stopping violence against women" (Wittman

et al., 2010). The group acknowledged that food sovereignty for communities can not be adequately achieved if respect and equality for women is not ensured. After all, subsistent food production and consumption processes largely depend on the effort of women. Women constitute 43% of the agricultural workforce, and are often more involved in producing food for domestic consumption than imports (Patel, 2012). Via Campesina made a declaration in Maputo on gender equality:

If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles, and if we do not create new gender relations, we will not be able to build a new society (La Via Campesina, 2008).

Indeed, most families, especially in subsistent communities around the world, depend largely on the labour of women for the healthy and culturally appropriate food that food sovereignty movements advocate for. Women's contributions to the food system guarantee the food security of families and households, but too often in patriarchal societies, their own food security is not guaranteed as indicated earlier in the WFP report about northern Ghana.

NORTHERN GHANA IN CONTEXT

The Northern Region is one of the ten administrative regions of Ghana, a country lying at zero longitude of the West Africa coast. The region occupies an area of about 70,383 square kilometres, the largest region in Ghana in terms of land area. It shares boundaries with the Upper East and the Upper West regions to the north, the Brong Ahafo and the Volta Regions to the south, and two neighbouring countries, the Republic of Togo to the east, and Cote d' Ivoire to the west. With a population of nearly 2 million, the main ethnic groups are the Dagomba people who are featured in this study. Other minority groups include the Nanumba, Mamprusi, Gonja and Komkombas. The region typically has a four-month cycle raining season which starts between May and October, followed by the dry season which peaks in December and January with the dry

and also one of the districts in which the initial food vulnerability survey was conducted. The District has a population of 39,033 with a total number of 4,133 households. The average household size in the villages studied was approximately 25 people per household but the district itself has an average of 9.5 persons per household (Ghana Statistical Service, 2017). Of the population, about 88.3 percent are engaged in subsistent agriculture, forestry and fishery, approximately 6 percent are engaged in Craft and related trades, while 3.1 percent are engaged in services and sales work. Households tend to be bigger given the need for labour to work in the traditional labour-intensive farms. Households consists of a household-head, his spouses, biological children, parents, brothers and sisters, parents/in-laws, grand-, step-, adopted and foster children, other relatives and non-relatives. Households in this district are larger than the national average due to the use of family members in daily activities and the presence of extended family and non-family members to assist in farm work (Nukunya, 2003).

The vegetative cover is basically Guinea Savanna interspersed with short drought resistant trees and grassland. The land is generally undulating with several scattered depressions. The soil is generally of the sandy loam type except in the low lands where alluvial deposits are found. Apart from the gentle slopes, the soils are highly vulnerable to sheet erosion and in some areas, gully erosion also occurs. This condition occurs primarily because of the perennial burning of the natural vegetation, leaving the soils exposed to the normally high intensity of the sun. The continuous erosion over many years has removed most of the top soils and depleted or destroyed its organic matter content. This situation does not allow the soil fauna to thrive and keep the top soil layers open and enable healthy plant roots to develop. It results in serious compaction, with considerable reduction in rainfall infiltration rate. Major trees species include the sheanut, dawadawa, mango, which are economic trees and form an integral part of livelihood of the people.



Figure 4. A phot depicting a typical Savannah landscape of northern Ghana in the dry season (source: DagbonNet.com)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The next chapter in this study – Chapter Two – gives details of the methods used to collect data for this study. It provides further justification for the choice of research location and the processes through which villages, households and individual participants were recruited to participate in the study. Chapter Three offers explanations on the philosophical foundations of this study, with focus on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin this study. It explains how the discourse on gender and food security is connected to the larger issues of the global competition for the access and control of environmental resources and the socio-cultural and political inequalities inherent in them. Chapter Four presents the voices of some of the research subjects, as well as analysis of the key themes that emerged from the study. The issue of farm land ownership and its relevance to individuals’ food access to and control over household food is

thoroughly examined in that chapter. The intersections among patriarchy, polygamy, and large family make-up is also discussed with attention to how these create various statuses among women in households, and how those varying statuses create different realities for some women. I refer to these women as ‘other women’ because they are neither household heads nor first wives of household heads who are normally featured in studies like these. Rather, they are different women who hold positions in the household that are less than the status of a first spouse. Their statuses as ‘others’ create different realities that are often missing in contemporary discourse on gender and development. The final chapter presents a summary of the research questions and the findings of this study. It highlights the intrinsic relationship between land ownership and food security while recommending the need to dig deeper into the case of the ‘other’ women who are often excluded not only in their households or communities, but also in contemporary development and academic discourse.

CHAPTER TWO: Methodology and Research Design

INTRODUCTION

This study was qualitative; thus, the validity of its findings is not founded on statistical comparisons of cases. Neither does it seek to represent data in numerically measurable terms. Instead, qualitative research gathers information in narrative forms “to describe or understand people and events in their natural setting” (Manheim et al., 2008: 429). To provide a thorough portrait of how gender impacts the food security of women living in male-headed households in the Kumbungu district, I used two complementary qualitative methods – interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews and group discussions are mutually complementary for two distinct reasons. The interviews in this study provided individual perspectives between male and female members of households, and allowed my respondents the privacy to speak honestly to some sensitive issues concerning marriage and household relationships and their implications on individuals’ access to and control over farmlands and food. This kind of privacy is intricately important to the validity of the information respondents give. Focus group discussion on the other hand requires exchange of information among participants and the researcher, and therefore offers no privacy. However, group discussions produce varied perspectives and thus allow the researcher to probe further on the similarities and differences in experiences. These intrinsic features made the two methods complimentary for this research.

My choice of qualitative methods for this study is guided by the philosophy of feminist epistemology, which advocates knowledge that is based on the unique socio-political and economic experience of women as a distinct category. Feminist epistemology challenges the established methods of data gathering in sociology and other social sciences. It argues that such methods are subjective to calculated biases towards a dominant group – knowledge process as power to the

dominant group, and in this case, the male group who dominates scientific research (Benton et. al., 2009). This is consistent with the objective of this research, which is to probe further on the 2012 food vulnerability report on northern Ghana by the United Nations World Food Program (WFP). The findings of that report relied heavily on statistical data to identify social groups who were vulnerable to hunger, without interrogating the details of socio-cultural and political dynamics that underpin the unequal access to and control over food among different social groups. This study was designed to dig deeper into the part of the report, which highlight women as the most vulnerable to hunger. My thesis is focused on male-headed households because the WFP report implied that women in such households in the northern region are less vulnerable compared to those in female-headed households.

The project involved three phases of data collection, all of which pertained to exploring and comparing the unique experiences of women with regards to access to and control over food. Phase I involved 30 in-depth interviews with 15 male and 15 female participants. The participants in this phase were different couples who were randomly selected from 15 households from the three villages sampled. The female participants in this section were first wives of the male participants who were the household heads in most cases.

Phase II was made up of four sets of focus group discussions involving women 20 women who were second wives, third wives, daughters, sisters and extended relatives. The perspective of these other women is important to understand the impact of polygamy and extended family system on women's food security in the North. These women hold different statuses in the households other than first wives, and those statuses have different implications with regards to access and control of household food. They were selected from the same households as the Phase I participants.

Phase III consisted of in-depth interviews with 10 different experts working on gender, agriculture and food security in northern Ghana. The interviews with these experts –mainly researchers, government staff and development workers with non-governmental organizations in northern Ghana – were intended to shed light on policies and agrarian practices in northern Ghana and how they impact gender and food security in the area.

Variable	Sex	Units	2010
Household population	Male	Persons	1212083
	Female	Persons	1232978
Population (15+)	Male	Persons	659866
	Female	Persons	708982
Population (18+)	Male	Persons	575041
	Female	Persons	636086
Literate	Male	Number	339278
	Female	Number	244382
Persons 12 years and older, Urban	Male	Persons	245512
	Female	Persons	258535
Persons 12 years and older, Rural	Male	Persons	498563
	Female	Persons	525677

Fig. 5 – Basic demography of northern Ghana according to the 2010 census (Source: Statistics Service of Ghana)

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

The research was conducted in the Kumbungu District of northern Ghana, which has a total population of 39,341 people who live in a cluster of about 20 villages, mostly farm settlements. The Kumbungu District was carved out of the then Tolon/Kumbungu District with Legislative Instrument 2062 in 2011 (Government of Ghana, 2017). It was inaugurated on the 28th June, 2012 with Kumbungu as its capital. The District shares boundaries to the north with Mamprugu/Moagduri district, Tolon and North Gonja districts to the west, Sagnerigu district to

the south and Savelugu/Nanton Municipal to the east. The district has a total land mass of 1,599km² being one of the smallest district in the Northern region.

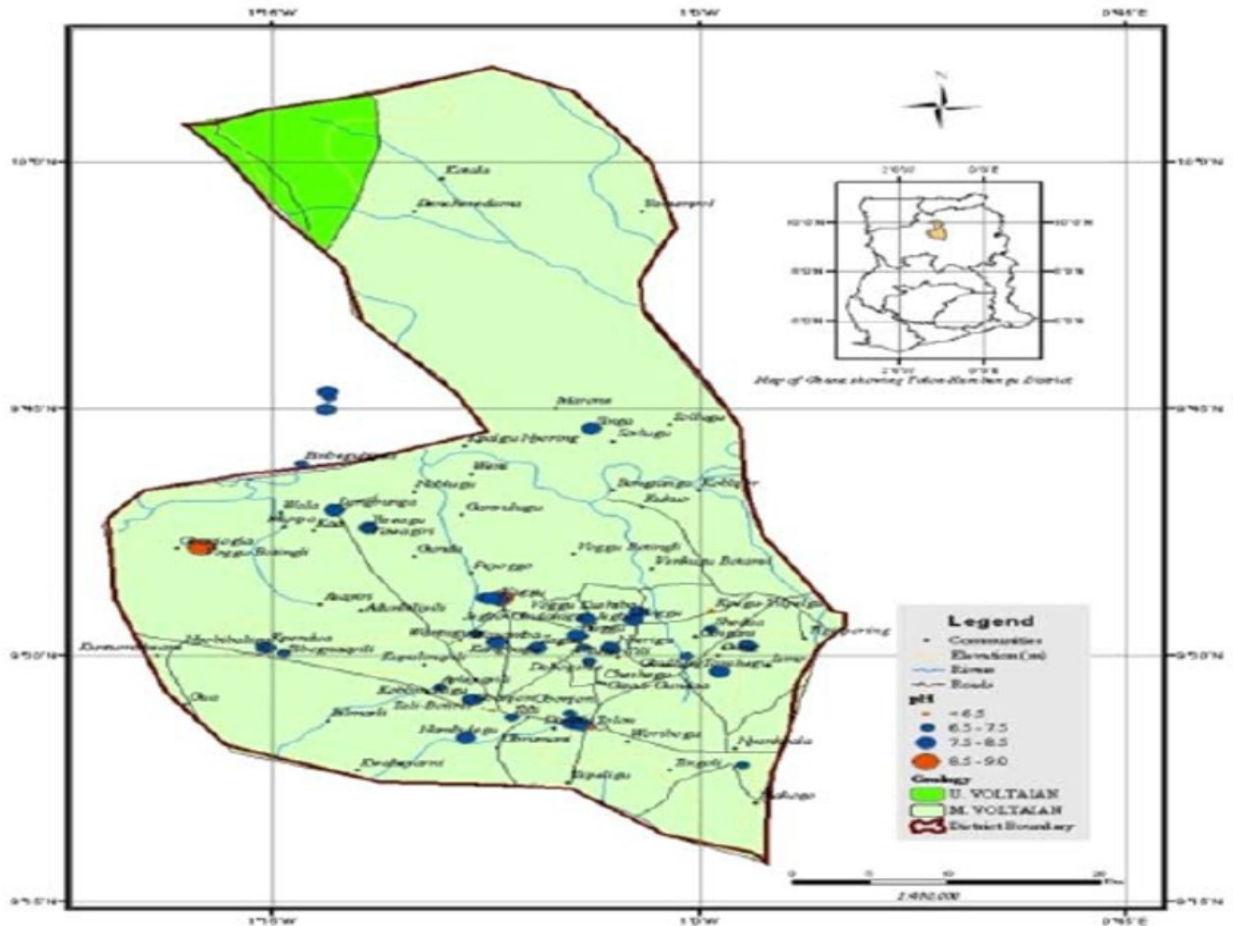


Figure 5 – Map of Kumbungu district of Ghana (Source: Government of Ghana)

More than half of the district's inhabitants are women, with the Ghana Statistical Service estimating their number to be 51.7 %. The district has a total number of 4,133 households. The average household size in the District is 9.5 persons per household. Spouses form about 9.1 percent, per the 2010 census data, although it is unclear if the data considered the fact that some men have multiple wives. About six in ten of the population aged 12 years and older are married, 32.5 percent have never married, 0.3 percent are in consensual unions, 4.1 percent are widowed,

0.8 percent are divorced and 0.5 percent are separated. By age 25-29 years, more than half of females (89.4%) are married compared to a little above half of males (57.7%). At age 65 years and above, widowed females account for as high as 47.4 percent while widowed males account for only 3.4 percent. Among the married, 86.0 percent have no education while about 50.2 percent of the never married have never been to school. Subsistence agriculture is the primary occupation of the adult population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2016). About 95.4 percent of households in the district engage in agriculture. Most households in the district (97.9%) are involved in crop farming. Farming practice in the district is highly dependent on rainfall and heavily labour-intensive. This district has been selected because it was identified as one of the most food insecure areas in the region by a 2013 survey of the World Food Program, and has been targeted by various development efforts designed to increase availability of food.

I selected three out of the 20 villages for this study – Yepala, Duli Zugu, and Kumbung Kukuo – mainly for their proximity to the farm settlements in the district, and for the fact that people in those villages practice subsistence agriculture. There were also logistical considerations in making this decision. For instance, the locations of some of the villages included in the original WFP study are very remote and difficult to access with vehicles, thus putting them out of my reach with the limited resources at my disposal. I spent three months – June to August 2016 – in these three villages conducting interviews and focus group discussions. The predominant language in the area is Dagbanli, which is my mother tongue. This afforded me the opportunity to take charge of the recruitment process and engage directly with the research subjects without the need for a translator.

Upon arrival in each of the three villages, I first paid courtesy visits to the local chief's palace. This was a culturally appropriate first step to ensure the local leader was aware of my

presence as a researcher. It was also a friendly gesture to be led to the palace by someone who was known to the chief or elders of the chief's council. For that reason, I was accompanied by a local contact, Alassan Damba, who was a community representative at the district council.



Fig.7: The chief of Yepala village (Middle), his senior linguist (Right) and researcher (Source: Somed Shahadu) Damba was a known face to many of the chiefs, elders and people in the three villages I lived in for this study, partly for his work as a councillor, but also for his family craft in drumming and praise-singing – *Lungsi*, also known in parts of West Africa as griots. Praise singing is a form of epic poetry, together with the complex repertoire of rhythms (MacGaffey, 2013), mostly recounting notable events in the ancestry of chiefs and other important people in the Dagomba tribe. My friend Damba comes from that lineage considered to be custodians and repository of the oral history of the local tribes in the North, and having him with me during my visits to the palaces proved very helpful. At each of the three palaces, the introduction of myself and my research

project was preceded by short ceremonies in which Damba briefly recited the praise names of the village chiefs. Aware of these qualities and also his understanding of research projects, there was no better candidate to lead me through the community entry process than him, and my faith in him was quite rewarding. After answering queries from the chiefs about myself and my research and the intended use of whatever information I collect from their communities, all the three chiefs did not hesitate in granting my request to recruit their villages for my research. It then gave me the opportunity to recruit the participating households.

The participating households were selected based on a random number of house count starting from the main entrance to the village. Every ninth household counted was selected. In all, five households were chosen in each of the three villages. The recruitment process was in three sequential stages for Phase I and Phase II participants. It began with me contacting the household heads of each of the households selected. Each house in northern Ghana has a household head, and it is courteous and culturally appropriate to approach a household through its leader. The household head is usually the oldest male in the household. In situations where he is still active, the household head takes charge of household resources, and controls the affairs of his wives and any other inhabitant of the household. The other inhabitants may include other couples who are related in various ways to the family line of the household head. In a situation where he is too old to engage in active domestic and agricultural tasks, he delegates such roles to the other male inhabitants of the household, but exercising key household decisions such as allowing a researcher to understudy the household rests ultimately on the household head. I obtained informed consent from the household head explicitly giving me permission to contact the female participants in the household individually and separately to participate in the study. If the household head was not the male participating in Phase I, his consent was sought before contacting the male participating in Phase

I. Since there were mostly no doors to household entrances in these villages, I walked into each of the selected households and asked to speak to its head person. If he consented to the participation of his household and its individual members, I proceeded to contact the participating members of the household separately. If consent was denied, the next immediate household was considered. But none of the household heads initially contacted declined participation, and there was no need to switch.

The Phase I of this study was designed to target a couple in the same household. This means that a woman and her husband was approached in each of the 15 households. Each of them was approached separately, but their participation depended on both agreeing to participate. Each of them knew that his/her partner was participating in this research. However, the husband and wife were each approached separately and consent was sought at the individual level. I took this step for two reasons. The first and perhaps the main reason was to ensure that participants in the study, especially the women did so at their own volition and by force. Due to the male dominance in the households I recruited, I could not ignore the possibility that some men will show-off their power to exert unnecessary pressure on their wives to participate or give different answers other than what the women intended to say. The second reason was purely academic in that the validity of the data I collected hinged on the conditions of the participants at the time the interviews or focus group discussions was held. If for any reason a participant was under duress at the time of their participation, it meant that I could not use their response in my study.

The separate consent process made it possible for me to keep individuals decision to participate or not, while avoiding the possibility of putting my female informants to unnecessary risk. If for instance a wife decided she did not want to participate, it was easy for me to find an administrative or logistical excuse to remove them from the study without having to explain the

real reasons to her husband. A verbal recruitment procedure was followed in which I read a pre-written script outlining the purpose of the study and the expectations on participants. (see Appendix A2 for male participants and Appendix A3 for their wives). In a situation where one or both couple refused to participate, I moved to the next immediate household. Also, if randomly selected households did not have inhabitants fitting the profile required for this category of research subjects, the immediate house will be considered. The decision to recruit only 30 participants for this phase was largely influenced by resource constraints, but it was almost the same number of participants in the food vulnerability survey conducted by the World Food Program in 2012.

Considering that polygamy and extended family system are common in many parts of northern Ghana, it is likely that some of the male participants may have other female relatives in their households who have other statuses other than the first wives. These ‘other’ female categories may include women who are second, third, or fourth wives, sisters, and unmarried distant relatives. Each of these categories has different power implications that may significantly influence access to and control over household farmlands and consequently food. Participants in Phase II (focus group discussions) were women in the ‘other’ category. They included women who are not first wives in their households – second, third or fourth wives, daughters, sisters and distant relatives. These ‘other’ women were selected from the same households as the participants in Phase 1. They were purposively selected to reflect the diversity of female statuses in households in northern Ghana. Only one ‘other’ woman was chosen in one household, and thus each of the 5 participants in a focus group came from a different household. Participants were contacted individually and separately. First, I obtained household consent from the head. The woman involved was then approached for recruitment (see Appendix A4) and for her separate consent to be obtained (see

Appendix B4). This ensured that the household head gave permission for me to approach the woman individually and, allowed the woman to withdraw without fear of possible recrimination from the husband or household head. The head of their various households and perhaps others were aware of their participation and this had been emphasized in recruitment instrument attached in Appendix A4 and repeated in the consent instrument in Appendix B4. Obtaining the consent of the household head minimized any kind of risk associated with their participation. In cases where any participant expressed any kind of discomfort regarding her participation I advised them not to participate, and then explained to the household head that this was due to an administrative issue on my part.



Fig. 6 - Participants at a focus group discussion at Duli Zugu (Source: Somed Shahadu)

For Phase III, a snowball method was used to identify participants. It involved 10 semi-structured interviews with development workers and researchers attached to government departments and

NGOs working on areas of gender and food security in the district. Since all participants in this category were highly educated and had offices in the area, a written recruitment document (Appendix A5) was sent to them through the mail or email. Their addresses were obtained from other contacts who have worked with them in the past.

CONSENT PROCEDURE

Oral consent proved to be the most culturally appropriate and sensitive mechanism for confirming participation. To sign a piece of paper before starting a conversation is a foreign practice in Ghana, especially in the rural areas where illiteracy is mostly high. For Phase I participants, an initial consent was obtained from the household head (see Appendix B1) granting the researcher permission to contact other members of his household separately to participate in the study. After that, both husband and wife were asked to give a separate verbal consent to their participation. The consent was sought at different times to avoid the possibility of any kind of undue influence on the wife by her husband. The study required both couple to give their consent before their participations were confirmed. I translated the verbal consent text into Dagbanli (the local dialect in Kumbungu) and read it out to each of the participants, exactly as contained in Appendixes B2 and B3. I am fluent in both English and Dagbanli, which allowed me to ensure that the translation was substantively correct and culturally appropriate.

With regards to participants in Phase II, the consent process was like the procedure in Phase I. I obtained an initial consent from the household head, granting me permission to contact the women separately to participate in the focus group discussion. After that I personally approached the woman separately for recruitment (see Appendix A4) and subsequently, her consent (see Appendix B4) to participate in the group discussion with fellow women from other households. I

translated the verbal recruitment and consent texts into the local dialect and read it out to each of the participants separately, exactly as contained in Appendixes A4 and B4.

For participants in Phase III, all of them spoke and understood English language. The consent text in Appendix B5 attached was read out to them in English, exactly as contained in the document. Oral consent was audio recorded separately from the actual interview, with the permission of the participant and a copy of the consent instrument was then offered to participants in this phase to review or to keep, as they desire.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

This study is divided into three phases. The first phase was semi-structured interviews for 15 male members of selected households and their first wives. Here, it was important to conduct the interviews at separate times for male and female participants: some of the women were shy or found it intimidating to freely express their views or concerns when their husbands were present. As Shope (2006) found in her research interviews with couples in rural South Africa, “the silence of the women when their husbands were present was deafening” (Shope, 2006: 170). The interviews were held at participants’ homes, but in a semi-private space where a third party could not easily eavesdrop. The interviews began with the researcher introducing himself and going through the consent process guided by Appendixes B2 and B3 attached. The first few questions were about the participants’ household compositions, and current responsibilities. Interview questions probed participants about ownership and control of family farmlands, food production processes and decision-making. Issues of control over household food and its consumption was also discussed. It is important to note that these issues were not considered secret in the cultural context of northern Ghana. None of the interviews exceeded an hour. Details of interview questions for Phase I can be found in Appendix C1 attached.

For Phase II, the group discussions were held at either village schools or church buildings. Participants were asked to commit two hours of their time to talk about their household agricultural practices and food production processes. A research assistant was present to take notes on individual participants' responses to the discussion questions. Notes were taken on participants' responses to the issue of access to and control over food in their respective households. The discussion was recorded and transcribed alongside these notes immediately after the focus group concluded, to ensure as comprehensive a record as possible.

The interviews in Phase III were held at the participants' offices. For duration of an hour, these expert informants answered questions bothering on gender practices in Gushegu, agricultural policies and interventions in the area, as well as household practices that influence food security. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the individual participant. I also took notes during the interview. The responses from this phase complemented the section of this study which seeks to examine how gender and agricultural policy and practice impacts women's food security.

RISKS AND BENEFITS ANALYSIS

As Scheyvens et. al. note, the fundamental ethical issue in development research is the power relations between the researcher and the research subjects or participants. In their view: "the nature of much development studies research means that we will be in position of power in relation to most of our participants" (Scheyvens et. al., 2003: 149-151). This is particularly true in the case of this study, considering that my position as a graduate student at a Canadian university presents me as a privileged person, especially for a district that has over 50 percent illiteracy rate, and where graduate education remain a remote possibility for its semi-educated population. Except the expert informants, none of the participants in this study had attained a high school education. Also, a male and member of the same tribe as my research subjects, cultural expectations among the Dagbamba

people may have had implications on my relationship with my female participants. In a tribe that has patriarchal dominance in cultural expectations, my social position as a male could have intimidated some of my female participants, although there was no such issue in my experience. Scheyvens et. al., (2003) advise that researchers take conscious steps to avoid reinforcing the feeling of powerlessness which participants may have, by considering how we interact with participants and how we behave in community more generally. To that end, I took conscious steps to mitigate any possibility of intimidation between me and my research subjects. Apart from acquainting myself with the village and household leadership to establish the trust needed between a researcher and community, I made a good use of my experience of village life in northern sometimes to the admiration of the people. This was necessary because I was an outsider in these villages in that it was the first time I had visited and barely knew anybody there. But I was also an insider because I was from the Dagomba tribe like the villagers and a one-time villager with almost the same socio-cultural experience of village life as most of my research subjects. I needed to navigate a complex territory because the villagers would likely not take me too serious if I played too much of an insider or perhaps I would have missed the critical eye of an outsider which was necessary to do an objective examination of my own culture, a factor which in part inspired this study in the first place. But playing an outsider wouldn't have helped much anyway.

Villagers in the North are generally suspicious of city dwellers, because city people are often privileged with education or other opportunities that are rare in villages, for which the villagers feel isolated. Part of the mistrust is generated by the feeling among villagers that city people do not do manual labour work like villagers do in their farms, and yet have far better opportunities in life. There is also a general feeling of inferiority among village people that city dwellers are smart but dishonest people who can use their high education and exposure to take

advantage of unsuspecting villagers. In as much as this perception is not true of all city people, one cannot begrudge villagers who are protective of their territory.

When I lived in Libga (the small village in northern Ghana where I was born), most good things came to my village through outsiders from Ghana and abroad. The area's district council mostly brought in agriculture extension officers from Tamale and Accra to train households on modern agricultural techniques. Philanthropists and volunteers from Accra and other parts of world like Europe and North America would come and help to provide essential social amenities like drinking water, medicine, fertilizer and other initiatives that were beneficial. In the early 1990s when there was a guinea-worm epidemic in my village and its environs, the NGO Doctors Without Borders brought in health professionals from Accra and abroad to treat patients. Instances such as these have endeared outsiders to villagers in the North. But there are other instances that have made villagers aware of some outsiders who deliberately take advantage of unsuspecting or gullible villagers. Aware of these, I needed to tread cautiously and to be strategic in a way that enabled me to harness to benefits of an insider while keeping my useful outsider eye at the same time. I was upfront in my introduction by making it clear to my research subjects that I was a student learning at a Canadian university, and that my research was merely an academic exercise towards fulfilling the requirements of my degree. I also made it clear to them that although I have had an experience of city life in both Ghana and abroad, I grew up in a village myself and still had almost all my family in the north. This was necessary because some of the participants initially thought I was a government functionary with the power and resources to influence government's development initiatives in the villages. Such a thought was have been reason enough for some of the participants to attempt to impress me rather than giving the honest responses the study required.

As Teusner (2015) notes, instances like these can affect the validity of my data in the context of qualitative research.

Insider research can often be sensitive insofar as it is more likely to uncover sensitive material about stakeholders and sites, and if this poses symbolic or material threats to participants or institutions then it can jeopardize the outcome of the study (Humphrey, 2012: 573). I found myself in a position to critically examine an aspect of my culture I have been very much invested in from childhood. As a male Dagomba man, there is no question that in the past, I may have consciously or unconsciously shared in the privileges reserved for men in the patriarchal culture of the north. To appropriately examine the issues required a personal evaluation of my own experiences in relation to that of my research subjects. This sometimes generated some emotional stress for me, given my own history with this culture. As mentioned earlier in my introduction, I grew up working with my mother as a farm labourer. My mother had no opportunities to own a farmland herself. Because of that, it was always difficult for us to meet the standard three square meals per day. Listening to some of the women in this study sometimes evoked memories of my own past, and often evoked emotions that could have interfered with the sense of objectivity I needed to maintain throughout the interviews and group discussions. These specific emotional implications of insider research have been little explored (Ross, 2017).

Another risk issue that emerged in my study design was the confidentiality of the women brought in to participate in the group discussions and the risks it may subject them to. Indeed, it is not possible to maintain confidentiality in a focus group. The participants risked rebuke if their husbands or household heads heard they said something at the discussion that was deemed insulting or disrespectful of them. I took some steps to mitigate this risk. The recruitment of households was widely spaced out – about 10 kilometres apart – meaning participants lived at a

reasonable distance from each other. This in a way reduced the risk of information leaking easily to participants' home, although it did not entirely mitigate the risk. Therefore, I have emphasized these risks in the recruitment document (see Appendix A4) and consent document (see Appendix B4) to explicitly identify this risk and to alert participants that they can opt to not participate in the discussion if they felt they would be at any risk. The consent document also cautioned them not to make any comment that would put them at any risk. On my part, I avoided discussion questions or follow-ups that could have influenced participants to say something that would put them at risk.

Also, as indicated earlier, an initial consent was obtained from the household head to permit the recruitment of the women for this study. Seeking household consent at the beginning minimized the risk and potential harm on the women even if their husbands or household heads later heard of the information they gave to the researcher. In the household structure of the Dagomba tribe, most men have an average of four wives. A first wife has a higher rank and influence of domestic affairs than the second wife. The second wife ranks higher than the third, and in that order. The fourth wife is usually young and less influential, but is sometimes the most favourite of her husband. This has a significant influence on household power dynamics, especially with regards to household roles and responsibilities. However, wives have no control over each other and only negotiate their influence through their husband who in most cases is the head of the household. Therefore, the risk to wives participating was little, so far as the household head gave consent for the researcher to recruit them. Furthermore, my knowledge and cultural capital as a member of the Dagbamba tribe was useful assets to this study, as they placed me able to easily negotiate the cultural structures involved and to identify signs of discomfort among participants. Having helped to start an NGO promoting gender equality and girls' education in northern Ghana,

I have gathered useful experience in dealing with women, community and culture. That experience was useful in helping me to resolve these ethical constraints.

Participants did not incur any expense with their participation in this study. To avoid potential transportation cost, all interviews were held at participants' primary locations and places that will not require them to incur any transport related cost. Some participants in Phase II (focus group discussion) required transportation to the venue where the discussions were held. In such cases, a local transportation system – donkey ride – was hired to convey participants to the venue and back. I paid for all the necessary expenses out of pocket. Also, this study was conducted in the time between June and August, which is usually less intense in terms of farm work, because it is the 'dry season' when there is no rainfall.

No other compensation was given to participants, except a small courtesy gift of laundry soap for household participants and Dalhousie branded pens for expert informants, as appreciation for their time and participation. Participants who did not complete the study also received the courtesy gift. The outcome of this study will have no direct benefit to participants. However, I hope that the findings will shine a light on how gender dynamics shape food security, and provide potential avenues for policies or projects that target women empowerment within these household dynamics. If this important issue is not given a significant attention in the policy response to food security, a broken system would be patched up to reinforce patriarchal hegemony and gender inequality, which are the causes of food insecurity for most women in northern Ghana.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In sum, qualitative methods are best suited for this study because its findings will rely on the unique experiences shared by the men and women as well as the expert participants. These unique

experiences cannot be measured in numbers; neither will it be best to present them in a form of statistical data. Instead, its validity is inherent in the comparison of the responses against existing concepts and theories on gender inequality in access to and control over food. These theories and concepts will be given a detailed treatment in the next chapter. It is in line with the philosophy of feminist epistemology, which contends that there is no better way to study or accurately represent women in research than in their own words and perspectives. The privacy afforded participants in the interviews allowed them to discuss some of the most sensitive issues on household relationships which mitigating potential risks. The focus group discussions complemented the interviews with varied perspectives from the “other” women whose voices are often missing in feminist research on sub-Saharan Africa.

CHAPTER 3 – The forgotten: exclusion of ‘other women’ in theoretical analysis

INTRODUCTION

When Ama Aidoo invited village women from Duli Zugu to a community workshop to brainstorm on ways to empower female farmers in the North, she was encouraged by the good turnout. About 20 women of mix age groups showed up to the workshop, which was an initiative by Ama’s NGO to collect first-hand information on the experiences of female farmers in the region. In a village where most women are normally excluded from the decision-making processes, this all-female workshop was designed to enable the women to speak about their experiences without fear of recrimination from their male relatives who occupy hierarchical positions in households and the village at large. But Ama’s optimism faded as the workshop went on. A few of the women dominated the whole discussion; the rest sat quietly throughout the meeting without saying a thing. “Initially, I didn’t understand why the other women were quiet,” says Ama. “Something was not right.”¹

Ama has been working with an international NGO in this part of Ghana for about two years now. Herself a Ghanaian from the South, she was aware of the culture of male dominance in the North, and how that affects the confidence of some women. What Ama did not know was that there also exists a complex social hierarchy among women in this polygamous part of the North. In fact, the dynamics of gender inequality in these villages are limited, not by social relationships between men and women, but also amongst the women themselves. Due to the practice of polygamy, most men in this district have multiple wives who live in the same compound. A first

¹ Ama said these in an interview during my fieldwork in Tamale on 22nd July 2016

wife has a higher rank and influence over domestic affairs than the second wife. The second wife ranks higher than the third. The last wife is usually young and less influential among other wives, but is oftentimes the favourite of her husband. There are other women who are extended family members, but live in the same households. These complex household power dynamics, shape decision-making at both household and community levels in important ways. Categorizing the women in these villages as the same in terms of gender inequality blurs the intricate power inequality among them. As Ama learned, ignoring these dynamics can complicate the relationship among the women and negatively impact development outcomes.

Various scholars have considered the intersection between gender and environment vis-à-vis the unequal distribution of ecological resources and their benefits between men and women in many parts of the world. In this chapter, I attempt draw on three contemporary theories which in various ways resonate with the gender dynamics of access to and control over farmland and food harvests in general, although those theories, if viewed in isolation from each other, do not adequately address the unique situation of other women created by the practice of polygamy and large family sizes in northern Ghana. The three theories – Ecofeminism, Feminist Political Ecology, and Gender Asset Gap – if combined provide insights into the causes of male dominance in the distribution of ecological resources at the global, national and community levels, as well as implications for individuals at the household level. While highlighting how they resonate with the case at hand, I will also attempt to specify how each of these lenses sheds light on the varying realities facing women in a polygamous society like the North of Ghana.

ECOFEMINISM

Scholarship on the intersection between women's social experience and ecology originated from the 1974 publication of "Le Féminisme ou la Mort" (Feminism or death) by the French writer

Françoise d'Eaubonne. D'Eaubonne is credited for coining the expression 'ecofeminism' (Roth-Johnson, 2013), a term which draws a close bond between women and nature based on a shared history of oppression by patriarchal institutions and dominant Western culture, as well as positive identification by women with nature (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Eaubonne highlighted the unique relationship between women and nature and how society's disregard for women is comparable to its contempt towards the environment (Roth-Johnson, 2013). This idea was subsequently adopted and explored further by feminist-ecologists such as Greta Gaard and Lori Grue whose 1993 publication *Towards global justice and planetary health* explained how capitalism, patriarchy, and religion intersect to oppress both women and the natural world (Gaard et al., 1993). Archambault (1993) observes that, the theory ecofeminism means different things for various ecofeminist. But they are all guided by some four fundamental principles that underpin the philosophical foundations of ecofeminism (Karen, 1990: 125-146). The first is the emphasis on the important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. The second contends that understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. The third theme is that feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective. And finally, solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective (Karen, 1990: 125-146).

The most popular and perhaps most radical idea of ecofeminism was advanced by the Indian scholar and environmental activist Vandana Shiva. In her 1989 publication "Staying alive: women, ecology, and survival in India", as well as in subsequent publications, Shiva offered an analysis of the plight of Third World women, arguing that women's affinity to the natural ecosystem provides the perfect balance necessary for sustainable livelihood. Shiva lamented the effects of the global capitalist movement and quest for development, which were increasingly

destroying the 'good' woman-nature relationship, leaving starvation and ecological destruction in its wake (Shiva, 1989: 45). This view is consistent with the examples from northern Ghana, where incoherent tenure regimes and patriarchal cultural practices exacerbate the local agricultural system, and how the limitation on women's access to community agrarian resources such as farmland undermine household food security.

Just as Shiva's work continues to stir controversy in academic discourse, some feminist scholars have criticized ecofeminist thought as essentialist, elitist, and irrelevant to the predicament of the world's poor (Roth-Johnson, 2013). Also, notable among the inadequacies of ecofeminism is its failure to account for women's varying experience of the natural ecology in different cultures. In a culturally diverse country like Ghana, factors such as group identity, race, and ethnic group create differences in how women experience the ecological system. For example, more women control farms and forest resources in the matrilineal South compared to the patrilineal North. And even among the "oppressed women" in the North, there exist multiple layers of inequality, which produces different realities for the individual woman. This is elaborated in Archambault (1993) succinct critique of the weakness of ecofeminism as a theory:

Ecofeminism must sort out its shortfalls: the reliance on women's biological functions to establish a connection between women and nature and the uncritical over-privileging of women's experiences, the inappropriateness of designating ideal female characteristics, and the regressive political implications of associating women with nature (Archambault, 1993: 21).

However, ecofeminism still provide a basis for understanding the paradox in terms of the significance of women's labour to the subsistence and agricultural system of northern Ghana, even though they tend to be the most vulnerable to hunger in the region. Its emphasis on the natural connection between women and the ecological system is consistent with the roles women in northern Ghana play in household farms in that many of those women feel naturally suited for

roles in the food production process such as planting, weeding, harvesting and stocking yield as well as cooking the food for household consumption. Whether that is a good thing for the women remains contested, but critics such as Archambault (1993) maintain that the claim that women are biologically closer to nature reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination (because of the connection between nature and nurture and women's 'innate' roles as nurturers) and limits ecofeminism's effectiveness.

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) is one of the most appropriate feminist perspectives that uses gender as a concept to explain the global trend towards unequal distribution of ecological resources and its ramifications for women's empowerment, agrarian livelihoods and development. It is a subcategory of Political Ecology (PE). PE emerged as a scholarly approach that sought to investigate the relationship between political economy and the natural environment, emphasizing the importance of understanding the power dynamics of access to and control over ecological resources. The origins of political ecology date back to the 1970's when journalist Alexander Cockburn, anthropologist Eric Wolf, and environmental scientist Grahame Beakhurst, coined the term as a way of intellectualising the relationship between political economy and nature. As environmental concerns swelled during the late 70s and 80s, the term's popularity increased and it eventually evolved into a free-standing field of study (Paulson, Gezon, & Watts, 2003).

Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) argued that viewing political economy and ecology as intertwined opened the door to new areas of analysis. For example, by examining the political nature of land fertility, Blaikie (1985) found that capitalist agrarian production and its reliance on crop surpluses contributed to soil degradation. Consequently, he argued that the decisions made by an individual farmer must be examined in the context of wider society to be fully understood

(Jones, 2008). PE promotes the incorporation of a worldview wherein everything is interconnected, and everything is political. It seeks to identify and understand the social, political, and economic forces behind environmental issues. As political ecologist Paul Robbins (2004) states:

The difference between this contextual approach and the more traditional way of viewing problems...is the difference between a political and an apolitical ecology. This is the difference between identifying broader systems rather than blaming proximate and local forces; between viewing ecological systems as power-laden rather than politically inert; and between taking an explicitly normative approach rather than one that claims the objectivity of disinterest. (...) Political ecology, (is) a field of critical research predicated on the assumption that any tug on the strands of the global web of human–environment linkages reverberates throughout the system (p. 13).

As an example, Robbins (2004) questions the apolitical and simplistic assumption that overpopulation in Kenya is leading to the destruction of wildlife habitat. Instead he argues that land tenure law, a competitive international market, and a high demand for food globally have all accelerated the conversion of grazing land to farmland. From this perspective, local and international political forces are integral to understanding the underlying causes of an environmental issue. The implications of using political ecology as a theoretical lens are significant, as suddenly the solution for dealing with a loss of wildlife can shift from the promotion of family planning to advocating for change in international food markets and local land policy. Initially, PE focused mostly on issues of class, but soon scholars began questioning how other categories of power could influence environmental outcomes, and the focus widened to include issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. Emphasis on these new efforts prompted the creation of Feminist Political ecology.

In their book, “Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experience”, Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari (1996) argue that FPE involves the examination of gendered relations of ecologies, economics, and politics in various communities around the globe. They state,

While there are several axes of power which may define people's access to resources, their control over their workplace and home environments, and their definition of a healthy environment, we focus on gender as one axis of identity and difference that warrants attention (p.5).

FPE is a broad concept that opens the door to multi-scalar analyses of how different genders interact with their environments and how social, political, and economic structures shape environmental outcomes. FPE allows the questioning and challenging of patriarchal structures on household, national, and international levels, and incorporates a gendered analysis in decision-making processes, particularly pertaining to environmental policy and practice (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Esther, 1996). Such multi-scalar analyses have become a critical component of FPE because it was found that often international or national policy programs are implemented without an in-depth understanding of the lived realities of men and women on a household level. Alternatively, development policy and theory have also been critiqued for "blaming" the local, by mislabelling deeply political ecological issues as mismanagement of resources by local communities (Paulson, Gezon, & Watts, 2003). By examining issues on a household level, FPE connects what is happening on the ground with higher-level development initiatives such as the agricultural development and hunger eradication programs being undertaken by the Ghana government and NGOs such as the United Nations World Food Program.

Another important feature of FPE is an emphasis on understanding women's access to, and control over, ecological resources including land, seeds, water, forests, food, livestock, agricultural technology, and information. A myriad of studies has found that power and politics have prevented women from either owning, controlling, or accessing environmental resources crucial to their physical or emotional wellbeing, their financial success, or their survival (Hovorka, 2012; Croppenstedt, Goldstein and Rosas 2013; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011; Rocheleau and Edmunds,

1997). If left unaddressed, these political and gendered barriers are likely to interfere with the effectiveness of agricultural development programs and policies.

For several reasons, FPE is one of the most suitable lenses through which to explain women's vulnerability to hunger in northern Ghana. In the first place, it considers gender relations at the household and community levels simultaneously, and how those relations affect resource distribution. Agrarian and ecological resources are the central focus of analysis within this framework making it an ideal lens through which to examine issues of women's access to farmland and food harvests. Analyses in FPE examine the intersections between power and inequality on the one hand, and socio-economic and political development on the other. These issues are the main themes to be explored in the next chapter. FPE emerged from the context of gender and development in Sub-Saharan Africa as Rocheleau et. al (1996) examined how the land registration process introduced in Mbeere, Kenya in the 1970s impacted the environment and gender relations on both household and community levels. There are also some significant similarities between the people of Mbeere in Kenya and the Dagomba people in Northern Ghana in that they are both patriarchal societies with comparable socio-economic and political structures.

Also, the FPE does not address the subtle differences in the experiences of women living in different socio-cultural circumstances such as polygamy and extended family system. Rocheleau et. al., (1996) put women in the same category as if to create an impression that all women in patriarchal cultures have the same experience of deprivation of ecological resources. Yet as the Ghanaian NGO worker Ama learned in northern Ghana, polygamy and family structures in the area create subtle inequalities among women, especially those living in male-headed households.

GENDER ASSET GAP

While FPE remains one of the most important frameworks for investigating how gender inequality impacts women's access to ecological resources, Gender Asset Gap (GAG) is a more recent attempt to identify the critical enabling or constraining social, economic and institutional factors affecting women's asset ownership in general. The concept emerged in 2009 as a team of development economics researchers sought to demonstrate the importance and feasibility of collecting individual-level data on women's and men's access to and ownership of property.

The gender asset gap is identified by comparing the incidence of asset ownership by sex. An individual is considered an owner irrespective of the form of ownership - that is, whether they own the assets individually or jointly with others. For comparisons across countries, this measure tells us not only the differences in the incidence of ownership between men and women, but also whether the asset is widely owned or not (Doss et. al., 2014).

Analyses of asset inequality and asset poverty have typically used the household as the primary unit of analysis, precluding a gender analysis except at the level of household headship (male vs female heads). Since most households consist of both men and women, this obscures the most interesting questions, especially the issue of access to or control over the assets and their socio-economic and political benefits. Growing evidence suggests that having assets in the hands of women is correlated with their empowerment; enhanced decision-making capabilities (Allendorf, 2007; Swaminathan et al., 2012); improved health and welfare of children (Allendorf, 2007; Park, 2007); and higher well-being at the individual, household, and community levels.

Gender Asset Gap was used as a conceptual framework to evaluate the differences in property ownerships between men and women in three different countries – Ecuador, India and Ghana. The evidence showed significant gender gaps in all three countries, despite variations across countries and by type of assets. Moreover, the gaps in the incidence of asset ownership

understate the gap in the value of the assets that women own, especially regarding high value items, such as homes and businesses. Understanding these patterns is critical to effectively target poverty reduction measures as well as to advance gender equality (Doss et. al., 2014). The gender asset gap in ownership of agricultural land was like that for housing in these three countries. In Ecuador men and women were equally likely to be land owners, while in Karnataka and Ghana, men were more likely than women to be land owners.

Gender Asset Gap helps to explain how the lack of farmland ownership contributes to women's vulnerability to hunger in northern Ghana. Its focus on individual level data of property ownership resonates with my third research question which examines the relationship between the control of household agricultural resources and the control of household food. Gender Asset Gap presents an opportunity to move beyond household as the unit of analysis, and to incorporate the dynamics and realities of individual members within households. This is consistent with the overall objective of this study, which is to evaluate the realities of women living in male-headed households. Moreover, Gender Asset Gap has cultural relevance to this study as Ghana was one of the countries in which the concept was originally tested. However, it must be noted that the data from Ghana focused on the South where gender relations and household dynamics would have been different from the North. For instance, households from the South tend to consist of nuclear families, meaning the North has larger household sizes than where these data were collected. While Gender Asset Gap recognizes that marriage and inheritance skews asset ownership in favour of men, it is mute on how instances such as the polygamy and patrilineal inheritance system may exacerbate women's inability to acquire assets. These will be explored further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In sum, the three theories or concepts I have used in this study each offer something important in understanding the intersection between gender inequality and access to or control over food in northern Ghana. The emphasis on the ‘natural connection between women and nature’ in ecofeminism is crucial to understand the labour and productive roles women provide in the subsistence agricultural system in the Kumbungu district. The emphasis on power in FPE helps to explain how patriarchal norms convey privilege on men in households in northern Ghana, which in turn skew the distribution of farmland in favour of men. The Gender Asset Gap focuses on measuring the asset ownership between women and men in the same household, which facilitates the intra-household level analyses that constitute the basis of this study. It also explains the negative outcomes of disproportionate asset ownership between male and female members of the same household. This helps to explain how land disparities translate into unequal access to food in a household. In this sense, the concepts are used complementarily in this study because they combine to illustrate the philosophical foundations of this study in a way that cannot be seen if they are considered in isolation.

When each of them is considered in isolation, it tends to characterize the experiences of women in a general sense, without recognizing that factors such as polygamy and large family sizes may create different social realities for some women. As we have seen, Ecofeminism, Feminist Political Ecology, and Gender Asset Gap all provide insights into the differences between men and women in terms of access to and control over resources. But each of them has limitations in terms of explaining the different realities of women in a polygamous society like the North of Ghana. They tend to put women in the same category as if to create an impression that all women in patriarchal cultures have the same experience of deprivation of ecological resources. Yet as I

will show in the next chapter, polygamy and the family structures in northern Ghana create subtle inequalities among women, especially those living in male-headed households.

CHAPTER FOUR: “Owning the Food”

INTRODCITION

In front of her house, under the shade of a huge baobab tree, is the woman known, for the purpose of this research, as Kuuku. She sits cross-legged in front of me. On her lap is her playful one-year old daughter who seems fascinated by my Zoom audio recorder. For the next hour, as I interview her mother, the little girl tries repeatedly to mimic Kuuku’s words as she describes, in compelling terms, how men control the household food in this remote district of northern Ghana.

“My husband decides how we are fed in this house,” she says. “Our husbands own us and the food. They have the final say about how we eat.”² Kuuku’s words echo the sentiments of the majority of the 35 women who participated in the interviews and group discussions during this study. She is a mother of 7 children and the first wife of a 52-year-old farmer at Duli Zugu who has 2 other wives. Kuuku calls herself a farmer, except that she has no farmland. She works more than 50 hours a week on her husband’s farm, but still feel uncertain about meeting her daily nutritional needs. The distribution of agricultural resources in this subsistent district is so skewed against women that it seems likely that Kuuku’s little daughter will be able to repeat her mother’s words clearly by the time she grows up.

The women of Duli-Zugu - a village of about 500 people – play crucial roles in the community agriculture system, the main source of subsistence for households and families. However, in the past decade, here and in the two other villages included in this study – **Yepala** and **Kumbung Kukuo** – persistent drought has severely affected farm yields. For most of the women, gender inequality and patriarchal hegemony have aggravated these ecological stressors

² Kuuku was talking to me in an interview during a field trip to Duli Zugu on Friday July 22, 2016

and undermined their ability to meet daily nutritional needs. A combination of incoherent land tenure regimes and patriarchal cultural practices limit their access to community agrarian resources such as farmland and undermine their right to land ownership.

GENDER AND FARMLAND OWNERSHIP

Farmland availability and ownership are crucial factors determining the food security of individuals and households throughout the Kumbungu district. Farming is the main source of food in this subsistence area of the North and – as the FAO notes – eradication of hunger and poverty, and the sustainable use of the environment, depend in large measure on how people, communities and others gain access to land and a variety of natural resources (FAO, 2016). The livelihoods of the rural poor are based on secure and equitable access to and control over land. Of the 30 households who participated in this study, only six had bought food to supplement farm harvests in the previous five years. All the others – a full 80 per cent of the sample – relied almost entirely on farm produce to satisfy their food needs, underscoring the importance of land as a natural resource.

But land is also a political resource that defines power relations between and among individuals, families and their community in terms of access to and control over food. In Phase I of the study, 15 couples were asked who owns the farmland that produces yield for household food needs. All but one male reported owning at least one acre of farmland, with fourteen men owning a combined 58 acres among them. Of these men, thirteen said that they inherited either part or all their farmlands from deceased family members, with a total of 42 acres reported as their cumulative inheritance. Among them, the 14 male landowners had acquired only 16 acres in ways other than inheritance.

In contrast, the female participants who were first wives of the male participants in Phase I had far lower rates of ownership. Six of the 15 women reported that they did not own any land. The nine who reported owning some farmland had obtained their lands exclusively through male relatives. The 9 women combined had 14 acres among them. Their narratives echoed the sentiment of male dominance over land ownership in this part of Ghana. The only one with more than 2 acres was Zaara, who had 3. She acquired her land as an inheritance on behalf of her two boys from a previous marriage, whose father died about a decade ago. She only keeps it in trust, and will lose control over its use once her boys became adults. Zara's case is one of some very rare circumstances in Kumbungu, where a woman gets temporary custody of her husband's land when he dies. Although she says her deceased husband's family did not resist her attempt to keep the farmland in trust for her children, Zaara's social position as the leader of one of the most influential women's group in the village may have helped her cause. She is a convener for a clique of traditional midwives – known as *Pagdogso Toginda* – who apply traditional home-treatment methods to deliver babies in remote communities where clinics are often not available.

Four other women acquired their lands through the solicitation of their partners or other male relatives who were said to be influential or 'big men' at the local palace. The remaining four women who said they personally acquired their lands through strong family ties shared with the ruling class (chieftaincy skin) of their respective villages.

Phase II of the study provides an even more striking contrast in the ownership of land by women. I refer to the women in this group as "others" because, unlike the first wives in Phase I, these women hold significantly less status in the households studied. Some of them are second and third wives, or extended family members such as sisters, nieces, aunties and mothers of the male participants. They exist at the lower end of the household hierarchy, a situation that produces

different realities for them in terms of their social relations with both male participants and their first wives. None of the twenty women in this category who participated in the focus group discussions owned any farmland. Eight had “unrestricted” access to land through male relatives who must be given part of the harvests from that land. Another six had “minimal access” to land through their partners, but must give those partners all their harvests. As one of the women, Sana puts it: “It shows my loyalty to my husband”. The remaining 7 “other women” said they had “no access” to any farmland, and only worked as part-time labourers for different farm owners. They received their wages in grains, mostly corn, millet and cowpea.

These results speak directly to the first question of this study: Who owns or controls crucial agricultural resources such as land in male-headed households? My findings suggest that traditional local norms combine with a patrimonial inheritance system to restrict women’s opportunities to acquire land in these villages. As discussed in previous chapters, Ghana’s land tenure system is characterized by pluralism in which customary and statutory laws co-exist in a complex relationship that produce ambiguities and tensions with regards to land governance and its distribution. The statutory laws establish the legal framework through which land is governed, but the laws in themselves are defined by customs, which Agbosu et. al (2007) describe as “largely unwritten, based on local practices and norms that are flexible, negotiable and location-specific”. Customary land tenure, as practiced in in the Kumbungu district, requires individuals who wish to acquire land to first consult the local chief who has jurisdiction over the territory in which the land is located. In his book: *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana*, the American Anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey explained the custom in which gives Dagomba chiefs exclusive control over land distribution:

In the official view of land tenure today, the chief holds allodia (sovereign) rights: all other members of the community have only unsurfactory rights which may be abrogated by the chief at will (MacGaffey, 2013).

By the customs and tradition of the Dagomba ethnic group, the chieftaincy office is a reserve for male heads of the royal family of the village (Staniland, 1976) supported by a council of male elders appointed through the discretion of the chief. This arrangement excludes women from an important decision-making body in terms of community land governance, and restricts their access to a critical social means through which land is acquired. As the data show, most of the women who said they have access to land either acquired it through their husbands or other male relatives. Women's access to and control over resources including land are therefore determined by male-centered kinship institutions and authority structures (Kuusana et al, 2013). The distribution of land may in turn affect women's agricultural decision-making, with implications for a wide range of outcomes, ranging from food security to adaptation to climate change (Doss et. al, 2015). Spichiger et. al. (2015) affirm this point by arguing that women's limited access to land restricts their role in the production of food; the decisions about what and when to cultivate food or even how to use harvests are largely determined by the male relatives who control land usage.

Furthermore, the customary rules of succession among most of the tribes in northern Ghana, particularly among the Dagbamba, tend to discriminate against women. Male children are by default the next of kin in the event of the death of a traditional title holder or property owner among these patrilineal ethnic groups. This is in part to blame on the failure of Ghana's statutory law to address decisively the issue of distribution of property by sex in the case of inheritance. In the prevailing practices, it is determined by customary law, which varies across ethnic groups (Doss et. al, 2015). Whereas almost all the 15 male participants in this study said they inherited some

portions of their farmlands, not one of the 15 women in Phase I nor the 20 women in Phase II had obtained any farmland by inheritance.

The case of one woman, Biibi, a 37-year-old mother of 6, illustrates the inheritance discrimination against women, especially when it comes to land in the north. Biibi's deceased father left an estate of 15 acres of farmland and two ranches with over 40 cattle. Although the oldest sibling, Biibi says her family overlooked her when her father's farmlands were shared. In fact, it all went to her 6 male siblings, one of whom later hired her as a labourer in his own share of the farms. She is paid with tubers of yam and a medium-size sack of maize after every harvest. "It's barely enough to last us for a full moon," she said. "It's hard to feed myself and my children because we don't get support from my husband," Yet, Biibi appears to have no hard feelings for being left out of her father's estate. "What can I do?" she asked³.

Biibi's story is not an isolated case. In fact, a clear majority of girls and women face similar problems when it comes to the distribution of inheritances. Landed property is generally inherited by men and under the patrilineal system of inheritance practiced in the Kumbungu district, a wife is not a member of a deceased husband's family; neither is she considered by her deceased father's family. She has no right to inherit their property, though she may have a right to maintenance. The net effect of the rules and practices relating to access to and use of land and rights therein and succession is that women have limited access to land in this region, and a lot of those rights are generally less permanent in nature. It also seems that the little access women do have to land is on very unfair and even exploitative terms. Additionally, Peterman (2012) observes that women

³ Biibi said these during an interview at Yepala on Wednesday August 3rd 2016

“typically have fewer claims on assets and are more vulnerable to falling into poverty when households dissolve through either death, divorce or abandonment”.

This finding resonates with that of Kuusana et. al. (2013) who conclude that norms in northern Ghana are dominated by male-centered kinship institutions and authority structures which limit women’s rights to land ownership. In a study to investigate women’s inability to acquire land among the tribes in the North, Kuusana et. al., (2013) found that both village chieftaincies, in which only men are eligible to participate, and the patrilineal rules that dictate relationships within families reinforce male dominance in the distribution of communal resources.

This trend appears to resonate among other patrilineal social groups across sub-Saharan Africa. Kassie et. al. (2013) found a similar trend in Kenya, where access to resources linked to agriculture had a clear gender bias. They found that women in many parts of Kenya only get access to land only through their male relatives, who have the first right to land inheritance and priority in its ownership. For the majority of women in Kenya who cannot access land, their participation in farm activities is limited, making them vulnerable and food insecure. Their vulnerability in this sense stems from household power dynamics, which result in socially or economically dependent individuals having less power in the household (Chang, 2010). Women’s dependence on male relatives in the acquisition of farmland may render their needs and desires secondary when it comes to the distribution of farm yields, since satisfying those male relatives are usually preconditions for access to the farmlands. It may also make it difficult for the women to leave dysfunctional or abusive relationships.

In their examination of five countries in the Global South including Ghana, Park et. al. (2015) found that the choices of crops women grow in their farms are largely influenced by male relatives and household food needs. Women’s participation in agriculture in this regard is more

for the satisfaction of male relatives and household food demands, and less for their own food security don't household food needs overlap with women's food needs in terms of choice of crops. As the responses of some of the women in this study will show in later sections, a lot of women prioritize the daily meals of their husbands over their own nutritional needs.

In fact, the issue of gender inequity in access to land is a global phenomenon and not a problem restricted to sub-Saharan Africa. A 2008 report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) succinctly captured the global trend of women's struggle with land rights and tenure security:

In India, Nepal and Thailand, fewer than 10 per cent of women farmers own land in their own right, while in Kenya, where women provide 70 per cent of agricultural labour, only 1 per cent of them own land (IFAD, 2008).

In Ecuador, Radcliffe (2013) found exclusionary practices operating on multiple levels to shape women's land tenure insecurity. This sentiment is consistent with the verdict of participants in Phase III of this study, who unanimously agreed that women's inadequate access to land inhibits their participation in the agricultural or local food productions system. All the ten participants interviewed – six of whom were agriculture extension officers in the northern region – agreed that the customary law system which characterizes land governance is inherently discriminatory and that gender equity must form an integral component of any future land reforms. The following lamentation by one of the extension officers, Amankwa, accurately captured the issue at hand:

We can have a direct impact on farm productivity when we improve the level of access to and security of land tenure for women. Unfortunately, some negative cultural practices are inhibiting women from owning or having direct access and control over land (Field notes, 2016).

The problem is particularly widespread in the more rural areas, where access to land is crucial for livelihood, and at the same time, where oversight of its governance is inherently lacking. The growing presence of estate developers, banks and ultra-modern amenities in some of the main

towns and cities of the northern region has increased the importance of land as a commercial commodity. For this reason, the government is actively involved in regulating the tenure system, whereby state institutions such as the Land Commission and the Administrator of Stool Lands have intermediate responsibility for documenting land ownership and collecting the state's share of royalties accrued from its transactions. In most cases, ownership validation is necessary to enable landowners to process building permits and bank loans, which are the fundamental uses of land in cities and towns as opposed to rural areas where land is primarily used for subsistence and smallholder agriculture. Prospective land owners must first go through the customary process which involves a written offer from the palace – having paid cola nut and money to the chief – who has traditional jurisdiction over the area in which the land is located. The written offer of the chief is then sent to the Office of the Administrator of Stool Lands (OASL), which gazettes the offer on behalf of the King of the Dagbon Kingdom (the Overlord of the Dagbamba people). This stage of the process is important for two reasons: First, it enables the King to keep track of land released by his divisional chiefs for purposes of collecting his share of the royalties accrued therein. Secondly, it enables those seeking land to obtain the seal of the King, which is a key requirement to finalize the transfer of ownership at the Lands Commission of Ghana, the statutory body mandated to formalize transfer of land ownership. These processes are designed to institutionalize the processes through which land is acquired to optimize the potential economic benefit inherent in its ownership, while also providing a legitimate framework through which every individual – including women with means – the right to acquire and register land in their own names.

However, in the rural districts where the economic value of land is not as high as it is in the cities there exists less accountability and government supervision of the traditional rulers and the way they govern land. The process is different. The formal bureaucratic framework, which

appears to liberalize land acquisition, is non-existent. The process is entirely at the discretion of the village chief, who distributes the land based on social and family relationships. In all three villages where this study was conducted, none of the land-owning participants had a deed or any sort of official documentation of the land they claim; neither did the lands have any official demarcation of boundaries. Instead, ownership was defined by a verbal approval of the traditional chiefs of the villages who have allodia right through custom to assign ownership to community members. As one of the respondents puts it: “I have no need for papers [deed] for my land ... my family has been growing crops here for ages, and everybody in this village knows it now belongs to me”.⁴

LAND AS AN ASSET

The extent to which individuals and families can be food-secure largely depends on the opportunities they have to increase their access to assets such as land, as well as access to markets and other economic opportunities. People who have extensive rights to land generally enjoy a more sustainable livelihood than those who have only limited rights to land; those who have limited rights are, in turn, often better off than those who are landless (FAO, 2016). As Berry (1989) argues, access to land, capital, and labour is often interrelated in African rural economies. Analysis of rights to land “promotes rather than precludes consideration of access to resources in general” (Berry, 1989). Land is also a political resource that defines power relations between and among individuals, families and communities under established systems of governance (IFAD, 2008). Yet the full socio-economic benefits inherent in access to land cannot be guaranteed, unless individuals

⁴ Yakubu Danaa said these in an interview during my field trip to Yepala on Sunday 3rd July 2016

have exclusive rights over its ownership and control. Those seeking to enjoy the full benefit of land must first hold it as an asset.

The term asset is often used very loosely in discussing resources that individuals, families or groups control (Johnson et. al., 2016). Carter et. al. (2006) define asset as “conventional, privately held productive and financial wealth, as well as social, geographic and market access positions that confer economic advantage”. The accounting definition of an asset considers it as “anything tangible or intangible that is capable of being owned or controlled to produce value and that is held to have positive economic value. Assets represent value of ownership that can be converted into cash (Sullivan et. al., 2003). Within the realm of international development, the way assets are understood comes from the concept of Sustainable Livelihoods:

It recognizes five capitals – natural (land, water), physical (agricultural and household durables), financial (cash and savings), human (health, knowledge, skills), and social (group membership, social networks) – and posit that these capitals underlie the ability of households to engage in livelihood strategies (Sullivan et. al., 2003).

As suggested by these definitions, the key component in the definition of an asset has to do with ownership and control. For a property to be considered as an asset, its owner must possess it in a way that is uninterrupted and have control over the benefits inherent in its use. In the case of land, its owners must have exclusive rights to determine how it is used; if it must be used for agriculture as it is in the context of the villages sampled, its owners must be able to determine what crop to plant on it and how its harvests are to be used.

To fit into the definition of an asset, the women in this study who said they owned land should have control over its use and its benefits. This, however, is not the case. “How can I say the harvests belong to me while my husband still lives?” asked Amina, a 50-year-old mother of 6 who has a two-acre farm in which she plants yam, cowpea and groundnuts (known in North

America as peanuts.) Amina's deceased father was a chief in her village for many years. Her maternal brother is the reigning chief in the village, through whom Amina acquired her land. Despite this ostensible ownership, Amina says her husband makes important decisions about the land such as what crop to plant on it. "He keeps the cowpea and yam to feed our family and sells the groundnut to solve other family problems," she said. "He is the man and those are his decisions to make."⁵

Amina's remarks are not a mere endorsement of the significant control her husband still has over the land she personally acquired through her own family. It reflects the cultural expectation in patriarchal hegemonic societies where women are under pressure to relinquish control of their assets to their husbands or male relatives who are considered as custodians of the household's gross resources. Ownership of assets for these women is therefore partial or temporal in that their male relatives still have some influence over the purposes for which it is used, and how proceeds from its use – farm harvests – are expended. For those women whose sources of land are through their husbands, they will lose all rights over their parcels in the circumstance of divorce, or when they are no longer the favourite wives, which are all real possibilities in this polygamous cultural setting.

In this sense, these women cannot claim their lands as assets because their ownership is not only partial but also temporal in that they could lose rights to the use of those lands in the likely situation of changes in their relationships with the male relatives through whom the lands were acquired. This is consistent with the conceptual foundations of proponents of Gender Asset Gap,

⁵ Amina Naporoo, Sunday 3rd July 2016 at Yepala

who fundamentally argue that women are less likely to own assets of productive significance, a situation which results in a wealth gap in favour of men.

ACCESS TO FOOD

This gender gap in access to land also has a significant impact on the dynamics of household subsistence and decision making with respect to food security. Household members who control agricultural resources and decision-making are more likely to control decisions on how to use farm yields. In male-headed households, this creates a gap between men and women in terms of access to the household food stock. As one of the informants puts it: “harvests are no longer the same here. Our barns are almost [empty] dry”⁶. Barns – known locally as *Kambong* – are structures located in front of many households to store farm harvests. In the three villages where this study was conducted, most barns were small-round-mud houses, plastered with cow-dung and roofed with thatch made of rice straw. They are used to store farm harvests – mostly staple grains like corn, millet, cowpea and red beans, and also tubers like yam, cassava and sweet potatoes – for domestic consumption in the rural areas of the northern region. By “dry barns” the informant was referring to the poor harvests that plagued farmers in recent times and caused significant food shortages for many households in the northern region. As indicated in the earlier chapters, patriarchal norms exacerbate the agricultural production systems, which often lead to overuse of soil, and makes the farms in these areas less resilient during a period of drought. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture estimates that farm yields in the north has decline by more than 5% between 2004 and 2014 (MoFA, 2015). This makes the north – once the food basket of Ghana in the colonial

⁶ Abukari Sabaa, Tuesday July 5th 2016 at Duli Zugu

era – an isolated failure in crop production as the national average of crop production maintained a steady 3.6% growth in 2014 (Daily Graphic, 2015)

In fact, six of the fifteen household heads that participated in this study indicated that they have borrowed food from their neighbours at some point within the last 5 years to satisfy their household food needs. A further 3 from the remaining 9 household heads reported that they had purchased food stuff at some point within the last 5 years to satisfy household food needs, a situation which is quite rare in these highly subsistent villages where farm produce is normally the common source of food for almost all households. This decline in crop yield exacerbates the inadequate food situation in many household, and further undermines the chances of many women to meet their daily nutritional needs, as the food available is controlled by men who have more control over farms.

Out of 15 household heads (male participants in Phase I) that were asked the question of who controls the household *Kambong*, four responded that they have “exclusive control” over the family food stock, and determine what meal is cooked and who partakes in the meals. Although the responsibility for cooking and serving food falls among the chores of women, accessing the source of food in those four households is absolutely controlled by men in these cases. One of them, Baako, summarised this in a three-word sentence, which captured the crux of the matter: “It’s all mine”⁷. These men indicated that food would always be available for them anytime they need it. But the implication here is broader than just lack of access to the food. For some of the women, it means they must bow down or show loyalties to their male relatives in order to eat

⁷ Baako Alassan, Tuesday July 5th 2016 at Duli Zugu

sufficiently, a situation that creates a primary mechanism which reinforces and perpetuates gender inequality more broadly.

An additional five men from this sample responded that they retain “absolute control” over the food stock in their household, but they leave the decisions of daily food management to the discretion of their first wives. The distinction between these two categories of respondents is that the latter have no interest in micro-management of household food, although they still recognize their absolute power over household food and exercise that power if necessary, perhaps when their relationship with any member of the household changes. But beyond the use of farm yield or food as a mechanism to control their relationship with the women in their household, these men may also decide to sell part of the harvests in nearby cities to earn income. The women in their household are shut out from similar opportunities to convert farm harvests into income.

An additional five men responded that they have considerable access to food in their household although they do not have the “absolute control” reported in the other cases. Significantly, these were in the households of the first wives who said they have *de facto* access to land. In these cases, the women have their own farms through which they make considerable contributions to the household food stock, and by extension, decisions with regards to household food.

In contrast, it appeared the female informants in this phase (first wives of the male participants) do not have the same level of access to and control over the *Kambong* in their households. These 15 women grouped themselves into two distinctive categories. The first category is those first wives who either contribute to household harvests through their own farmlands or are the only wives in their household, and as a result retain exclusive control over the preparation of food within the household. The nine women who fall within this category reported

that they get to eat sufficiently – an average of three meals a day – but add that their husbands still “own all food harvests” and thus control how they are used. In most of these households, there are two types of meals: one is the big common dinner – carbohydrate-based corn meal and vegetable soup – which is cooked in big pots and served among all household members. The other is a small meal usually cooked in the daytime at the discretion of those who have access to the food stock. In this case, only those individuals decide when and who to share the meal with. Individual members of the household who have no access to the *Kambong* have no guarantee to partake in these other meals – which are mostly protein beans or cowpea unless they have a good relationship with someone – the household head or powerful first wives – who have access to the stock. The household heads in this category hold control over the *Kambong*, and have prerogative to exclude other household members from these other meals.

The second category comprises first wives who either have no farmlands and thus have no harvests to contribute to the *Kambong*, or are in polygamous relationships where the discretion in food preparation is shared with other co-wives. The six women who fall within this category reported inconsistent meal patterns, with almost all of them averaging fewer than three meals in a day. One of them, Amina, said she finds herself “eating surpluses for most nights”⁸. Surplus food here refers to a rare cultural practice in many families among the Dagbamba tribe, where an extra plate is put aside every supper in anticipation of a surprise guest who usually doesn’t show up. Another, Muna, said the only time she is guaranteed extra meals is when it is her turn to attend to the domestic needs of her husband. In polygamous households, wives take turns – usually two days each – to attend to the domestic needs of the household head. This includes basic chores such as laying his bed, keeping him company, washing his clothes, serving his meals, and preparing his

⁸ Amina Jaato, Thursday July 7th 2016 at Yepala

choice of meals other than the common dinner. Muna said she has no other source of meals, unless it is her turn with her husband, when she gets to partake in the extra meal her husband asks her to make.

Even though a significant number of these first wives face marginal access to food within their own households, they are still better off compared to women in the “other” category who have even less influence within the household social structure. Of the 20 “other” women who participated in the various group discussions, only eight said they were guaranteed three meals each day. The remaining 12 described their daily meal patterns as inconsistent – averaging less than 3 meals a day – although some of them came from the same households as the participants in Phase I, where food was readily available. The revealing issue here is the inherent relationship between farmland ownership and control over household food reserve. The male dominance over farmland ownership in these villages appears to correspond with their dominance or control over the household *Kambong*, an outcome which corroborates an earlier finding in Ghana by Spichiger et. al.:

Women’s limited access to land impedes their participation in the production of food in that the decisions about what and when to cultivate food is determined by male relatives who control land and ultimately the food that is produced (Spichiger et al, 2014).

Apart from their restricted access to and control over land, another factor that may account for women’s vulnerability to hunger is the patriarchal practice of meal distribution in Dagbon, which requires male members of households – especially the household heads – to be served before women. In the same way, first wives must be served before the other women. Growing up in this part of Ghana myself, I am quite familiar with this practice, but the reasoning behind it remains uncertain. Some of the household heads I interviewed claimed that the practice functioned to keep the core labour force of the household well-fed and in good shape for farm work, which is highly

manual and requires excessive energy. Others simply had no cogent reason, except to suggest that such practices were household norms inherited from the ancient past. Almost all the first wives and the other women responsible for preparing meals in their respective households said tradition demanded of them to serve their husbands and other male relatives living in the household first. Older women are then served – the mother and other older female relatives of the household head – followed by the first wives and later the women in the “other” category. Although each person in the household eventually gets to partake in the meals, those at the bottom of the hierarchy – the women in the “other” category – face a higher risk of hunger when there isn’t sufficient food for everyone. Six of the “other” women who participated in the focus group discussions reported that their statuses as “others” has some significance to their ability to get sufficient food. The following lamentations by one of them succinctly illustrates this point:

It means I have to keep good behaviour and work hard in the house and in farm. I must be respectful. I don’t have any other option. [pause] I have no access to farmland to harvest my own food. Neither do I have money to buy. Therefore, I have no other alternative source of food apart from the small I get from my household.

This is supported by the accounts of majority of the women in the “other” category who said their access to food is generally uncertain. Therefore, differential feeding practices in these villages favour men over women and boys over girls in food allocation within the household, a situation which can lead to poorer nutritional outcomes for women and girls. This is consistent with the fundamental hypothesis that availability of food in households does not necessarily guarantee access to and control of it, especially if women do not have equal participation and rights over its production.

THE PROBLEM OF OTHERNESS

As explained in the previous chapters, contemporary analysis of gender inequality in terms of wealth distribution, access to and control over resources at the household level has yet to capture the predicament of women in the ‘other’ category of this study. Contemporary polygamy in Africa has been largely ignored by researchers due in part to the fact that any systematic study of polygamy is hampered by the persistent absence of adequate amounts of readily accessible and reliable data (Welch, et. al., 1981). In fact, several countries, in addition to the Statistical Office of the United Nations, no longer record polygamy as an independent marital status, as newly contracted plural marriages are increasingly subjected to legislative prohibitions. Although countries in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and Kenya have reduced polygamy, Fenske (2015) finds that the practice persists in many parts of the continent. As this study shows, the practice of polygamy is still common among the tribes in the North of Ghana, who are preoccupied by matters of spirituality, traditions and customs, and not by the legalities and bureaucracies of modern societies. As Welch et. al., (1981) notes, the need for the study of polygamous households remains, since the concept of polygamy in African discourse is inextricably interwoven with other sociological phenomena, such as kinship, social relationships and inequality.

But analyses of asset inequality and asset poverty have concentrated on the household as the unit of analysis, where the household is often defined as a nuclear family involving a husband, wife and often their children (Doss et. al., 2015). The sort of data analysed by Doss *et. al* in Gender Asset Gap, for instance, concentrated on the asset gap between couples living in the same household. The other theories and concepts explored in the previous chapter – Ecofeminism and Feminist Political Ecology – have often been applied in studies that focus on gender dynamics of

access to environmental resources at the community and household levels. These frameworks leave insufficient analytical space for understanding the complexities I have identified in this study. Specifically, the various concepts do not address the peculiar case of how a combination of polygamy and an extended family system – where family relations all live in the same compound – produce a distinct category of women whose social relations with other members of their households are much more complex than what is often presented in the discourse of gender inequity in the distribution of assets and resources. This is partly because the circumstances in which these women exist – polygamy and extended family practice – have become rare in many parts of the world, and as a result, detached from the realities to which these contemporary theories apply.

As the evidence of land ownership suggests, women who are first wives in a polygamous household are more likely to own land or have access to it than ‘other’ women in that same household. This seems to translate into access to and control over household food as well. Out of the 20 who participated in the focus group discussions, 12 indicated that they feel their status as ‘other women’ makes it difficult for them to access meals – inconsistent meal patterns – compared to first wives or male members of their respective households. The other 8 said their status inhibits their control over house meals that are distributed in household, even though they eat sufficiently on a consistent basis. Most of these other eight were older women whose sons were the heads of their respective households. This reinforces the complexity of the intra-household dynamics and relationships, where there is some sort of differential status among women in the same household, and where those relationships produce different outcomes in terms of access to and control over food. It is hierarchical – men are better off than first wives who are better than ‘other’ women in

the same household, among whom there exist differential statuses that produce different outcomes for the individual woman.

MEASURING WOMEN'S WORK

For most women in the Kumbungu area, farm work is more of a household chore than an occupation or income generating activity. Most of the 35 women who participated in this study identified farm work as part of their core duties as housewives, although a significant majority of them do not own farmland. However, women's contributions to the subsistence process are quite valuable, not only because they constitute most farm labour for households, but also because the roles they play in farms – weeding, planting, harvesting and most importantly feeding the farmers – are invaluable to the agricultural process in this farming district.

When asked about the average time they spend in the household farms per week during the farming season, only 3 of the 15 male respondents in Phase I said they work 40 hours or above. Another 6 said they work an average of 30 hours while the remaining 6 worked less than 25 hours per week. The 12 men who spend less than 40 hours a week in their farms engage in other trades through which they generate supplementary income; 2 are wood carvers, 3 are blacksmiths, 1 operates a bicycle fitting shop, 3 are thatch weavers, another two are drummers, while the remaining person works as a watchman at the district council. In contrast, only 2 of the wives of the 15 men are engaged in other income-generating activities apart from being housewives, which places a duty on them to also work on the household farm. 8 of the 15 women said they work on their household farms 40 hours or more every week. Another 5 said they work an average of 30 hours while the remaining 2 who have other trades worked less than 25 hours per week. Thus, the combined work hours of the 15 men in this phase averaged 394 hours per week on their farms, while the 15 women combined work an average of 518 hours per week on the same farms.

Women in the ‘other’ category work even more. Only 7 of the 20 participants reported working less than 30 hours a week. Each of the other 13 said they work an average of 40 hours or more. Thus, the ‘other’ women combined work an average of 723 hours per week, almost double the time spent by the male participants in Phase I, and significantly more than the first wives. These numbers contradict the assertion by some household heads that giving priority to feeding male household members is purposeful to maintain their energy levels necessary for the labour-intensive agricultural work.

In fact, the indispensable role of women in agriculture in Ghana and the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa is well documented. The 1970 study by the Danish economist Ester Boserup – “Women’s role in economic development” – laid the foundation to examine the hidden contribution of women to agricultural production, a phenomenon that had been ignored by researchers at that time. Boserup, having studied countries in Africa including Ghana, concluded that in villages, more women than men in cultivator families were doing agricultural work, and that women worked more hours per week in agriculture than men (Boserup, 1970). Following Boserup’s work, Bryson (1981) concluded that female labour is more important to agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa than the rest of the world. Bryson’s conclusion was based on his findings that agricultural production systems in Africa were still traditional and labour-intensive as opposed to mechanized agriculture as in other parts of the world. But he also observed that the prevalence of patriarchal norms in African villages meant that women had greater responsibility to manage the food needs of households, a process which is intricately intertwined with agricultural production in highly subsistent area (Bryson, 1981). Today, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that women make up almost 50 percent of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa, an increase from about 45 percent in 1980 (FAO, 2016).

This reveals a compelling paradox which has not been given the attention it deserves in both policy and academic discourse: the distribution of household food in some of the rural areas in Ghana does not equitably reward the enormous time and energy women invest in household food production. Surveys in a wide range of countries have shown that 85 - 90 percent of the time spent on household food preparation is done on women's time (WFP, 2015). Women constitute 43% of the agricultural workforce, and are often more involved in producing food for domestic consumption than imports (Patel, 2012).

Development institutions including the World Bank, the UNDP and their partners are increasingly recognizing the importance of women's asset ownership to the reduction of hunger and absolute poverty. The UNDP declared in its 1997 *Human Development Report*:

Gender equality needs to be part of each country's strategy for eradicating poverty, both as an end and as a means to eradicating other forms of human poverty. This means ...empowering women by ensuring equal rights and access to land, credit and job opportunities.

More recently, the FAO noted in a report that women could increase farm yields by 30% if they had the same access to productive resources as men. "This could raise total agriculture output in developing countries by almost 4%, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 17%," the report adds (FAO, 2015). In a 2006 *Action Plan* entitled "Gender equality as smart economics", the World Bank lamented:

Women's lack of economic empowerment ... not only imperils growth and poverty reduction, but also has a host of other negative impacts, including less favourable education and health outcomes for children and a more rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. In sum, the business case for expanding women's economic opportunities is becoming increasingly evident; this is nothing more than smart economics (World Bank 2006:4).

As Johnson et. al. (2016) note, only a few agriculture interventions prioritize the promotion of women's assets ownership as a potential for increasing food production and ultimately hunger eradication at the household and individual levels. The evidence of this can be seen

in the review of past and present agricultural development policies in Ghana that clearly fail to address the inherent gender inequality in access to and control over productive resources, most especially land.

LAND REFORM: A POTENTIAL SOLUTION OR MIRAGE?

The gender and agricultural development experts who participated in Phase III of this study all mentioned multiple factors such as poor access to income or capital, lack of basic farm implements and seeds as well as enormous reproductive responsibilities as impediments to women's equal participation in agriculture in northern Ghana. Significantly, these observations were mostly inconsistent with the views of the villagers themselves. For instance, while the experts suggest land redistribution as a potential solution to women's inadequate access to land, a lot of the participants including some of the women opposed the suggestion. In fact, the farmers themselves said the customary land governance system is fairer than government control, pointing to the fact that corrupt government officials may take advantage of such an initiative to steal their land. This perhaps illustrates the villagers' distrust of city dwellers and highly educated people in general, as there is no evidence to support the claims of the villagers. They may have been referring to the controversies in Ghana's colonial past when British administrative officials attempted to convert private lands to support development initiatives, because many villagers in Ghana still see their politicians and government officials as relics of the colonial regime – *Karachi Nima*.

The one issue the experts are worried about is the apparent gender gap in land ownership, and how the gap reflects access to and control over food in the subsistent areas of the region. Their position reinforced one of the hypotheses which form the basis of this study: systemic gender inequality in access to and control over family and communal agricultural resources such as land

must be addressed in northern Ghana if women are genuinely to be guaranteed food security. The experts recommended a new land reform underpinned by gender mainstreaming that will guarantee land rights for women. Three of the experts went further to suggest state-led reforms that will diminish the powers of the native authority (chiefs) in the business of land distribution. In the view of those experts, state values and principles – although also patriarchal in some sense – are not as radically opposed to women’s property rights as it is in the case of some native traditions, especially in the North.

In as much as these propositions are appealing, any serious implementation of such radical land reforms must overcome some practical challenges and political consequences. In the first instance, the political arrangement which grants allodial land rights to the native authority is underpinned by entrenched constitutional clauses which can only be amended by a national referendum. Yet the historical struggle and mistrust between the traditional authority and government over the control of land, coupled with public aversion to state meddling in issues of traditional jurisdiction will almost certainly make such a referendum a futile exercise. As MacGaffey (2015) notes, problems related to land tenure and ownership are among the most serious Ghana faces. Corruption and malfeasance reign in the land sector, characterised by a long history patchwork solution and endemic conflicts that often degenerate into violence, occasioning loss of life. The history of land tenure and its modern problems is intimately tied up with that of the chieftaincy. From 1894 to early 1950s, the Gold Coast government attempted to control access to land, but a combination of chiefs, educated professionals and European interests eager to keep government at bay insisted that all land was community property, thus keeping government’s hands off, without specifying who could act for the community (MacGaffey, 2015).

Also, the state laws governing the disposal or procurement of land do not in themselves oppose women's ownership rights. In the cities and cosmopolitan areas, like the northern regional capital Tamale, where land has assumed commercial status, women who have money can pay chiefs as men do and procure land in their own names. Among matrilineal ethnic groups like the Akans in the South, women do inherit land and can also buy it if they have money. The problem seems to be pertinent in some areas of the patriarchal North, such as the Kumbungu district, where land is acquired not on the basis of commercial exchange, but through social relations. Unfortunately, these happen to be subsistent areas where access to land is crucial to access to food.

These experts also expressed concerns around farmers' lack of access to credit facilities that will enable them to purchase modern agricultural inputs and technology to support sustainable agriculture in the region. There are several credit schemes available to farmers across Ghana through the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB), the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) and a host of private banks operating in the country. But the problem is a lot of the farmers in Ghana have no collateral security, which is a basic requirement by both government and private lenders. In Ghana, the common collateral for farmers seeking loans is land documents. But because almost all the farmers in Kumbungu and its environs have no documentation for the lands they claim, it is difficult for them to convince creditors. Moreover, the farmlands have no significant value since they are in villages where land has not fully assumed commercial status. So, it is hard for these farmers to access the credit facilities compared to farmers in the South and other cash crop growers who are in mainstream commercial agriculture. To this, the experts called for an arrangement where local district assemblies will serve as guarantors to help farmers to access loans. As reviewed in the introductory chapter, Action Aid Ghana, and several other interventions by a host of NGO's as well as the Ministry of Food and Agriculture are making some progress in

addressing the challenge of credit and farm inputs for farmers in the region, although much still needs to be done.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The responses from participants in this study speak directly to the question of how gendered household relations in northern Ghana impact access to and control over the resources of agrarian production and shape food security in male-headed households. Livelihoods in these subsistent areas are determined by secure access to and control over land, which remains a problem for many women in male-headed households. A combination of patriarchal customary practices and tenure regimes have denied women land ownership rights, although their contribution to the agricultural system and food production remain indispensable to the food security of households. The gender gap in land ownership results in a corresponding gap in access to and control over food, where male members of households have better control over their nutritional needs than women.

The 2012 *Food Vulnerability Survey* by the WFP initially identified female-headed households as the worse affected, but from the evidence in this study, it has become apparent that there is more to the problem of women's access to and control over food, especially when the cases of "other" women are considered. To this, the 10 experts I interviewed unanimously echoed the call by Park et. al. (2015) for a 'radical egalitarianism' where agricultural, political, and social systems are changed to address gender inequalities and social relations at the community and household levels. The Ghanaian government and agriculture policymakers have acknowledged the challenges of rural women in accessing land and the benefits inherent in solving the problem, yet only a few interventions prioritize women land rights. Some experts have called for radical land

reforms to diminish the powers of native authorities in order guarantee women's land rights, but such a reform may not be necessary and can cause more problems than solve them.

The solution to women's guaranteed participation in agriculture, and ultimately their food security in the North of Ghana, may lie in the principles of self-sufficiency and democratic governance of land, which constitute the core proposition of the Food Sovereignty Movement. As the concluding chapter will demonstrate, the fundamental principles of Food Sovereignty have the potential to lay the blueprint for genuine food security for all, including women, although the original meaning of the concept is controversial and can sometime contradict food security initiatives.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

The fear of a potential food crisis in Ghana has triggered a wide range of responses from both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture and non-governmental organisations, such as the World Food Program, currently implement major projects on food security in the region to foster community resilience in areas most vulnerable to food security (WFP, 2015). But as the WFP hunger vulnerability survey notes, gender inequality, being one of the dynamics of social relations in the northern part of Ghana, has significant impact on women's food security. The report identified female-headed households in the region as the most vulnerable in terms of food insecurity - 38% of households headed by women had the highest risk of food shortage (WFP, 2012). This is understandable, given that poverty rates among female-headed households tend to be higher than those of their male counterparts. It is particularly true within households in the Kumbungu district where there seems to be a severe poverty condition. Female heads of household in rural Ghana tend to be older and have fewer years of education than male heads of household. This is an issue that requires attention from policy makers as households might adopt negative coping strategies, such as an increased participation of children in productive activities, aspects which are not always factored in poverty analysis.

When contrasted with the fact that women head only 5% of households in the northern region, it becomes obvious that the WFP food vulnerability report did not sufficiently account for the food security situation of women living in male-headed household, who constitute the majority household make-up in the region. In fact, the majority of studies on gender inequality in access to and control of resources focus on the household as the unit, thereby making binary comparisons between male-headed households and female-headed household. This approach gives very few

details about the intra-household dynamics of gender inequality, obscures the realities of the individuals being studied and can lead to incorrect conclusions.

This study was different because its data collection focused on the individual man and women in the same household, while comparing the different realities gender inequality creates at the household level. This was in line with the feminist epistemology, which encourages researchers to dig deeper to produce knowledge that is based on the unique experiences of women. Approximately 50 percent of women in Ghana engage actively in agriculture, but they are typically even more disadvantaged than men, who also face challenges. Women smallholders have the added challenge of little power to improve their situation and limited access to resources, education, and training. In addition, they are not usually treated as equal participants in household decision-making.

My research sought to answer the following question: how do gendered household relations in Northern Ghana impact access to, and control over the resources of agrarian production, and ultimately food security? This chapter discusses my findings in relation to the main research question and the sub-questions that constitute the basis of this study. It also offers an elaborate discussion of the findings in the context of contemporary knowledge on the gender dynamics of food security. It is my hope that the findings will be useful to development agencies and policymakers who are working to improve food security in Ghana, especially in the northern part of the country where a significant fraction of its population remain vulnerable to hunger.

Who owns the farmlands?

As noted earlier, control over household food is shaped by individual's level of access to and control over the farmlands that yield food harvests for families. The focus on land in my

analysis is not to oversimplify or restrict the causative factor of women's food insecurity to access to land alone, but rather, to emphasize its importance to food production. Access to it is important because it is a political resource that determines the distribution of power at both communal and household levels. It is also an economic resource that determines an individual's level of participation in the local agricultural and market systems because as Berry (1989) notes, analysis of rights to land "promotes rather than precludes consideration of access to resources in general" (Berry, 1989). This is particularly so in the case of the subsistent Kumbungu district where access to land is the surest way to guarantee access to other important resources such as food, forest resources and in recent times access to loans and other agriculture support systems. Yet the evidence from this study suggests that this important resource is owned and controlled by men in most of the male-headed households studied in the Kumbungu district.

Three main factors are responsible for women's inadequate access to and control over farmland in the North. Paramount among them is the patrilineal system that prohibits women from inheriting the landed property of their deceased family members. Of the 15 men interviewed in this study, thirteen said that they inherited either part or all their farmlands from deceased family members, with a total of 42 acres reported as their cumulative inheritance. All 13 male landowners combined had acquired only sixteen acres beyond what they acquired through inheritance. In contrast, all the 35 women who participated in the interviews and group discussions said they have never inherited any land. In fact, one of them Biibi was overlooked by elders sharing her deceased father's farmlands. She was later compelled by her desperate circumstances to work as a labourer for her own step brothers who had received their father's farmlands as inheritance.

Apart from their inability to inherit land, women in the Kumbungu district have fewer opportunities to procure land on their own. Ghana's constitution entrusts the distribution of land

to traditional authorities such as chiefs and family heads, and in the patriarchal societies of the North, decision-making in those institutions are dominated by men. In the Kumbungu area, the chieftaincy regime which determines the distribution and disposal land is a male-centered kingship which promotes male patronage over female. That explains why most of the women in this study had to use their male relatives as agents to acquire land. The implication here is that, submission to male relatives is the only way these women can get access to land, a resource that defines food security and by extension quality of life in these villages.

But the biggest of all the problems is the fact that Ghana's land tenure system fails to protect women's right to ownership, especially in the remote parts of the country. As noted earlier, the Lands Commission established by the government of Ghana to ensure proper management of land distribution is only focused major towns and big cities where land has assumed commercial status. This is because the land registration procedures in the cities generate some revenue for the government in a form of taxes and royalties. Although land remains under the control of chiefs, the government still has significant interest in the process through which it is acquired and disposed, thereby keeping the traditional structures in check from excesses such as gender discrimination in the procurement process. In the villages, however, land is primary for subsistent agricultural purposes, which do not generate the kind of wealth that deserves the attention of government. The level of governmental supervision over village chiefs is nowhere near the strict procedures of land disposal often seen in cities, making the patriarchal authority the ultimate decision maker when it comes to land governance.

Therefore, land ownership and its control is the basis of social relations in households in the Kumbungu district. The majority of lands are owned by men, while women are restricted to only fewer opportunities to own land. Three factors – lack of inheritance, patriarchal land tenure

regimes and inconsistency of tenure regulations – are ultimately responsible for women's inadequate access to and control over land.

Household agricultural resources

The ramifications of women's inadequate access to land are enormous. Apart from the fact that they are missing out on the important resource that makes subsistence and sustainable livelihoods possible in these villages, they are also missing out on a resource that defines power and control at the household and community levels. But more importantly, it increases their vulnerability to hunger in villages that are already marked as hotspots for poverty and hunger by the United Nations World Food Program. The relationship between land ownership and hunger could not have been clearer in this study. Whereas over 80 percent of the male participants said they have complete access to food in their households, the female participants, most of whom have no access to land, said their levels of access to meals are based on social conditions which sometimes require them to submit to the whims of their male relatives.

Out of the 15 first wives interviewed in this study, only 4 said they have unrestricted access to food in their household. Unsurprisingly, the same four women were those who earlier reported that they have acquired land either through their husbands or through other male relatives. All the other 11 first wives either manages household food and eats based on the dictates of the male household head, or find themselves eating surpluses for most days. They eat less than three meals a day when there is no surplus food – an extra plate that is usually set aside for unforeseen situation eg. to feed a surprise guests. As explained earlier, surplus meals are common practice in many households in northern Ghana.

The odds are even more stacked against the women who are not first wives. Although first wives are not exempted from the male dominance, they at least command some matrimonial rights that privilege them over second or third wives, or even the other women in the household who are not spouses. These women are “others” because their social classes in the male headed households are inferior, a situation which leaves them at the bottom of the spectrum in terms of priority in the distribution of household meals. Most of the 20 “other” women who participated in the focus group discussions said their statuses as "others" have considerable influence on their ability to get access to or control household food stock. The following lamentation by one of the women succinctly captured the issue in her response at one of the group discussions:

To get food to eat means I must keep good behaviour by way of being hardworking and respectful to the head of my household. When I can't get sufficient food in my household I am in trouble. I don't own a farm to be able to make my own food. I don't have money to buy food either. So, my options are very limited (Fieldwork, 2016).

The situation facing these other women is unique. They are products of a combination of patriarchy, polygamy and the extended family system that are rare in modern societies. Polygamy particularly has become an obsolete practice, and thus has been excluded in contemporary studies and analyses of family dynamics and household structures even when the issues pertain to the Global South where such practices are still common. For instance, the WFP food vulnerability report suggested that male dominance of households may have been the reason for women's food insecurity, but the report had no perspective on how polygamy and big family system may affect the household dynamics. Similarly, the proponents of the main theory discussed in this study – Feminist Political Ecology – did not consider polygamy as an axis in their analysis of the gender dynamics of access to and control over the global ecological system and its inherent resources, although most of their case studies emerged from Kenya where polygamy persists in certain

regions. These omissions may not be deliberate attempts by researchers and development practitioners to dismiss the potential impact of polygamy on sustainable livelihood, but they certainly point to the mistaken assumption about the influence of polygamy on rural livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa. Again – discussion of the failing of the theory, but not its utility for your study. You need to do this.

Social relations in male-headed households

Social relations in male-headed households are defined by patriarchal norms that encourage and promote male superiority. The male head holds himself at the high end of the spectrum alongside other male members of the household, who are recognized as “bread winners” in households because of the male dominance on the agricultural system which yields food for household consumption. The first wives of the male household heads are next on the spectrum. As evidence from the field shows, first wives hold positions of power among women in the household not only because they are usually older, but also because they mostly have the primary responsibility of managing food stock and leading the preparation of meals. The “other women” who include the rest of the wives, and extended relatives of the male head are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their social statuses in the households are less superior compared to the first wives and the male household heads. These dynamics underlie access to and control over household farms as discussed earlier. Because the household farms are the main source of subsistence for majority of households in these villages, those dynamics underlie the distribution of other household resources including food and cooked meals. Those who have farmlands – in this case the male head and some of the first wives – have more chances of getting meals to satisfy their nutritional needs than those who do not have – the less superior “others”. As one of the other women puts it:

to get food to eat means to “keep good behaviour” and “submit to the household head and his first wives”. Their options are very limited.

Therefore, the implicit assumption that living in male-headed households reduces women’s vulnerability to hunger is not true if juxtaposed with the evidence from this study. A combination of patriarchal norms and polygamy have undermined women’s access to and control over farmlands which are the main source of household subsistence. The availability of food in male-headed households does not necessarily guarantee women’s access to and control over it, especially if they do not have equal participation and rights over its production. Systemic gender inequality in access to and control of family and communal agricultural resources in Northern Ghana must be addressed if women are to be genuinely food secure.

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