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The State of Soybean in Africa: Why Gender and Land Matter - Examples from Rural Ghana

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USAID's Feed the Future Lab for Soybean Value Chain Research, aka the Soybean Innovation Lab (SIL), is a research for development project begun in 2013. The team of 45 US researchers work in 17 countries, most of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa. The University of Illinois is the lead institution, accompanied by the University of Missouri and Mississippi State University. Recently, farmdoc asked SIL to provide a series of articles describing the state of soybean development in Sub-Saharan Africa. This series of articles describes the current state of soybean in Africa from the multiple disciplines that comprise the Soybean Innovation Lab. Peter Goldsmith is the Principal Investigator at the Soybean Innovation Lab. Feel free to reach out to Amy Karagiannakis at the Soybean Innovation Lab at soybeaninnovationlab@illinois.edu for more information on any of the topics, or if you would like to collaborate with the team.

A list of all articles published in the series can be found at:
https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/category/areas/other/soybean-africa-series

The Soybean Innovation Lab's Socioeconomic and Gender Equity Research team led by Dr. Kathleen Ragsdale and Dr. Mary Read-Wahidi of Mississippi State University studies the gender implications when introducing a commercial crop like soybean into local agricultural systems. One significant factor in soybean proliferation Africa involves land tenure, which differs significantly with land tenure systems in the Americas. The following is a study, one of the first of its kind, that explores the land tenure and gender issues within soybean cropping systems. The context is soybean producers in Northern Ghana.

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We conducted Gender Equity and Land Tenure (GELT) focus groups[1] to investigate gender equity and customary land tenure among women and men smallholder farmers Ghana's Northern Region. GELT focus groups were geared towards assessing gendered aspects of land acquisition, securing and controlling land rights, and traditions around land distribution.

The majority of land in Ghana's Northern Region is used for agricultural purposes and is informally held under customary tenure systems that vary across villages, districts, regions, and ethnic groups (Rico Méndez et al, 2019). In terms of gendered access to arable land in Ghana, a nationally representative household asset survey indicates that more than 83% of agricultural plots are individually owned/controlled by men, as compared to 10% by women (Deere, Oduro, Swaminathan, & Doss, 2013). Furthermore, previous studies of land tenure in Ghana indicate that, under current customary land tenure systems, women farmers' rights to land are more fragile than are those of men (Doss, 2002; Kuusaana et al, 2013; Lambrecht, 2016; Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). Under Ghana's pluralistic tenure system, gender-based discrimination in land tenure is constitutionally prohibited, but national regulations that have been adapted to comply with customary land tenure systems tend to impede the protection of women farmers' secure rights to land. We found that, consistent with Richardson and Gaafar, "Women's land rights are more insecure than men's in the Northern Region" (2016:5), given that – under customary land tenure systems – the primary way a woman can acquire and/or maintain access to land is with the permission and assistance of an adult male (e.g., a woman's father, brother, husband, or adult son).

For GELT Phase I, six focus groups (N=72) were conducted in 2017 among men and women soybean farmers in Ghana's Northern Region where soybean is grown as both a cash crop and a subsistence crop. For GELT Phase II, we returned to the Northern Region in 2018 to conduct eight follow-up focus group discussions (N=101) – four women-only focus groups and four men-only focus groups. The focus groups were disaggregated by gender in order to encourage full engagement in discussions among all participants. For Phase II, we focused on generational transfer of land and women farmers' rights to land (access to and security of tenure) to further explore gender biases in customary land tenure among Northern Region soybean farmers.

GELT Phase II results reconfirmed Phase I findings that the primary way women farmers acquire agricultural land is with the permission and assistance of an adult male, primarily through their husband upon marriage. However, it is important to note that in some communities custom dictates that if a husband wishes, he can 'reclaim' his wife's land and allocate her a different plot of land. In a feedback loop, this lack of tenure security made some women reluctant to make improvements to their farm plots, for fear their improved plots would be taken away from them.

Women participants noted that land tenure insecurity was amplified for a woman upon divorce or widowhood regardless of how many years that she had farmed a specific plot of land – particularly if the woman lacked an adult son or other senior male to advocate on the woman's behalf.

Participants also noted that polygyny can also impact a woman´s rights to land, depending on the community's customs. According to a participant in the men's focus group in Saboba District, "*When you pick a second wife, then you go to the first wife and you speak to her. And then you take part of her land and give it to the second wife*." And according to a participant in the women's focus group in Cheriponi District, "*If a man has three acres of land and he marries a second wife, then he gives each wife an acre of land and he gets to keep one acre. But if he has [only] two acres of land, then the man will farm one acre and he will share the other acre between the two wives."*

Such examples illustrate why women farmers – faced with limited resources – have less economic incentive to invest in expensive agricultural inputs and other resources for their farm plots when that land may be taken from them without recourse. And in a feedback loop, land tenure insecurity may inhibit women farmers' ability to secure economic resources (e.g., credit) to purchase agricultural inputs when lenders know that women's rights to land is insecure. As one participant in the women's focus group in

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Cheriponi District explained, "*When the land belongs to you, you know that you have rights over that particular plot of land. You always feel confident to know that this particular land belongs to you and no one can take it from you*."

Our findings contribute to the scant literature on land tenure in rural Ghana and illustrate how gender equity and land tenure impact women farmers' agricultural. An understanding of the gender aspects of land tenure is a necessary first step to addressing women's lack of access to fertile farmland, as well as extension and technical training, agricultural inputs, and cash income. Our findings also illustrate that by increasing land tenure security for women farmers in places like Northern Ghana, we can enhance agricultural productivity across the board.

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