This qualitative study\textsuperscript{1,2} used a focus group research design to investigate gender and land tenure dynamics in rural communities in the Northern Region of Ghana, where approximately 73.7 percent of adults are engaged in agricultural production, primarily as smallholder farmers (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). With estimated rates of poverty, moderate-to-severe hunger, and stunting among children 0-59 months at 21.6 percent, 31.1 percent, and 39.2 percent, respectively, this region has some of the highest rates of poverty, food insecurity, and childhood undernutrition in the nation (Zereyesus, Ross, Amanor-Boadu, & Dalton, 2014).

In terms of gendered access to arable land in Ghana, a nationally representative household asset survey indicates that 83.1 percent of agricultural plots are individually owned by men, 9.8 percent are individually owned by women, and 3.5 percent are jointly owned (Deere, Oduro, Swaminathan & Doss, 2013). However, data from this same survey indicates that gendered access to land is even more unbalanced in Ghana’s Northern Region, such that 94.8 percent of agricultural plots are individually owned by men, 5.2 percent are individually owned by women, and less than one percent are jointly owned (A. Oduro, personal communication, 16 March, 2017).

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\textsuperscript{2}The primary author assumes responsibility for the contents of this research paper.
For the current study, the research team is interested in investigating the effects of gender equity within customary land tenure systems as they pertain to agricultural productivity among smallholder men and women soybean farmers. Specifically, our research instrument focuses on generational transfer of land and women farmers’ rights to land (access to and stability of tenure) as a preliminary step in exploring gender-biased customary land tenure and agricultural output among soybean farmers. We conducted six focus group discussions (N = 72)—three women-only focus groups and three men-only focus groups—in three districts in the Northern Region where soybean is grown as both a cash crop and a subsistence crop. These sites include Chereponi District, Saboba District, and Tolon District. The focus groups were disaggregated by gender in order to encourage full engagement in discussions among all participants.

This is a preliminary study that aims to contribute to the scant literature on land tenure in rural Ghana by exploring the impacts of gender-biased customary land tenure on women farmers’ agricultural productivity in the Northern Region. An in-depth understanding of the gender aspects of sociocultural and economic institutions pertaining to land tenure will further enhance the capacity to develop interventions to improve land access and security of tenure among women farmers in rural Ghana.

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

Previous studies of land tenure in other regions of Ghana indicate that, under current customary tenure systems, women farmers’ rights to land are fragile when compared to that of men (Doss, 2002; Kuusaana, Kidido & Halidu-Adam, 2013; Lambrecht, 2016; Quisumbing, Payongayong, Aidoo & Otsuka, 2001; Richardson & Gaafar, 2016). Although gender-based discrimination in land tenure is constitutionally prohibited in Ghana, national regulations that have been adapted in deference to customary land tenure systems can inhibit the protection of women farmers’ rights to access and secure land. We found that, consistent with Richardson and Gaafar (2016), “Women’s land rights are more insecure than men’s in the Northern Region” (p. 5), given that the primary way a woman farmer can acquire agricultural land is with the permission and assistance of a man,
often either a father, brother or husband. We also found that land tenure insecurity may be further heightened for women farmers in the Northern Region by the interplay of common yet complex cultural practices, such as plot allotment and polygyny. For example, participants in both men’s and women’s focus groups reported that men are typically allocated larger plots as compared to their wives. Men then apportion approximately one-quarter of their allotment to a first wife. However, when a husband takes a second wife, the first wife may be required to share her plot allotment with the second wife.

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

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

Works cited


