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Changing gendered roles in agricultural production in northwestern Ghana

Northwestern Ghana has a geography where droughts are prevalent. Compared to the rest of Ghana, communities in this region are more dependent on agricultural production. This, together with a higher incidence of poverty, makes households highly vulnerable to impacts of climate change. This brief discusses findings from the European Union-funded *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy* (REACH-STR) project implemented by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), which examined processes of social transformation in the Upper West and Savannah regions of northwestern Ghana with the objective of informing policies and programs on how societal transformation processes influence climate resilience.

The study findings indicate that the two regions are experiencing several socioeconomic changes, including the expansion of infrastructure and education and health facilities. Farmers from these regions have observed changes in weather patterns, including an increase in the prevalence of droughts and dry spells. Due to labor shortages caused by increased patterns of male migration, as well as support provided by government and development interventions, female farmers are increasingly taking on roles in agricultural production previously considered a male domain. However, constraints faced by female farmers, including limited control over key resources such as land and not being able to have a voice where decisions are made, have not kept pace with these shifts. Women's roles in the reproductive sphere have also been slower to shift. In many instances, this has resulted in an increase in the amount of labor women have to undertake daily. These trends are concerning as agricultural livelihoods in the two regions become increasingly susceptible to the impacts of climate and environmental change. This brief recommends that policy and planning processes in the northwest of Ghana must consider these changing gendered norms and responsibilities to support women in their roles as farmers amidst a changing climate and to ensure their well-being.

Women farmers carrying water using basins for irrigation in the Wovoguma community, Northern Region, Ghana (*photo*: Barbara van Rijn).

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Introduction

The northwestern part of Ghana, located within the savannah agroecological zone, is highly susceptible to climate variability and extremes (Antwi-Agyei et al. 2017; Pienaah et al. 2023). This semi-arid area, where the Upper West and Savannah regions of Ghana are located, is marked by a unimodal rainfall regime from April to September of between 1,000 and 1,100 millimeters annually and an extended dry spell for the rest of the year (Ahmed et al. 2016; Owusu 2018). Droughts are a frequent phenomenon in this area (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr 2015). Across northern Ghana, where the Upper West and Savannah regions are located, the impacts of climate change are projected to materialize through a reduction in rainfall and a temperature increase by 1°C and 2°C by the year 2080 (Klutse et al. 2020).

These projected impacts are associated with a high degree of climate vulnerability for communities in these regions. Households in the two regions, and northern Ghana more broadly, are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture for livelihood-making, with few non-farm livelihood alternatives available historically (Abdul-Razak and Kruse 2013; Salifu et al. 2017). According to the seventh round of the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS7) conducted in 2016–17, the Upper West Region has the highest poverty rate (70.9%), with the incidence of poverty worsening between 2012–13 and 2016–17 (Ghana Statistical Service 2018). Northern Ghana is marked by disparities in socioeconomic development when compared to the south of the country, due to the continuing legacies of colonial interventions and subsequent economic policies by national governments (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr 2015).

Climate vulnerability is determined by individuals' and communities' positioning in social relations and hierarchies, including gender, class and ethnicity (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014). Numerous studies have shown how gender deepens vulnerabilities to climate change, including by impacting well-being, safety, agency and labor provision in productive and reproductive work (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Turquet et al. 2023). For example, Ahmed et al. (2016) discuss how women have to increasingly undertake more work in agriculture in response to agricultural intensification and climate change. At the same time, gender and intersectional social norms are not fixed but evolve based on political, economic and social change. Furthermore, Osei-Amponsah et al. (2023) discuss how climate vulnerability assessments in the Upper West Region of Ghana have so far largely taken a static view of gender roles and norms, and processes of social transformation in general, approaching them as concepts fixed across space and time. Osei-Amponsah et al. (2023) define social transformation as 'a persistent structural change in the economic and social relations that surround individuals, households, communities or a district'.

This brief is based on the findings of studies from the *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy* (REACH-STR) project, implemented in seven districts in the Upper West and Savannah regions. It looks at how gender roles and norms are evolving in the regions alongside changes in agricultural production, climate change impacts on climate vulnerable livelihood activities and other ongoing societal transformations. The brief discusses how these transformation processes are shifting gendered norms and roles, with mixed consequences for the labor burdens undertaken by women. The study has focused on gender relations but notes that gender (although it often is) may not always be the most important aspect of social positioning in determining climate vulnerability (Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2020).

Methods

The findings discussed in the brief draw from a survey of 2,107 households and data from key informant interviews, focus group discussions, activity mapping and life histories. The study sites were six districts in the Upper West Region (Wa West, Wa East, Sissala East, Lambussie, Daffiama-Bussie-Issa and Nandom) and one district in the Savannah Region (Sawla-Tuna-Kalba). Quantitative data were analyzed using Stata and Microsoft Excel, while qualitative data were analyzed using Nvivo.

Results

Farmers' experiences of a changing climate

Most farmers in the two regions (81.7%) felt that temperatures have increased in their areas over the last 20–30 years, with nearly 71.6% observing an increase in the prevalence of droughts and nearly 83.8% observing an increase in the frequency of dry spells. Most farmers (69.7%) have experienced decreasing reliability of rainfall patterns.

According to an eighty-year-old man, "*These days we don't understand the rains again; they come in a way that is not usual like before and we have to learn about the new pattern, but there seems to be no pattern to it. Although when we were children, the rains had issues, it had a certain pattern to it. It changes every year. But hopefully one day soon we will learn how it has changed.*"

Processes of socioeconomic change and rural transformation

In the past decade, the Upper West Region has undergone several socioeconomic changes, including the construction of school buildings and bungalows for teachers in many villages alongside National Community Health Planning and Services compounds. Connectivity to telecommunication masts, networks and the electricity grid has also expanded, together with transportation, and water and sanitation infrastructure. Access to electricity, mobile phones and internet usage has also increased. These changes have enabled new, albeit limited, forms of non-farm livelihood diversification, such as vendors for mobile money transferring and metalworking.

Agricultural production is also undergoing changes, with increased mechanization and greater availability of external inputs such as weedicides, herbicides, fertilizers and extension services provided by both state and non-state institutions. These developments have resulted in increased agricultural commercialization and the expansion of farm holdings. Fallow farming practices have also diminished.

IWMI team discussing irrigation needs with a farmer group from the Wovoguma community in the Northern Region, Ghana (*photo*: Barbara van Rijn).

The construction of earthen dams in certain villages and the construction of boreholes have increased water supply beyond the dry season for agriculture, livestock rearing and other livelihood activities. This has enabled dry-season vegetable farming in certain areas.

Farmers in the Upper West and Savannah regions have experienced mixed results with the expanded use of inorganic fertilizer. Some of the farmers have seen yield increases and felt it has enabled them to produce more with less labor. However, others have experienced poorer yields despite increasing inorganic fertilizer use, which has raised their production costs. They also associated this with a decline in soil fertility. In addition to declining soil fertility, farmers find themselves having to manage rising levels of infestation of the fall armyworm pest.

Cropping patterns have been shifting in response to increasing climate variability and growing agricultural commercialization. For instance, sorghum and millet production has declined significantly, while the production of maize, soybean, cowpea and groundnut has increased. Cassava production has also diminished due to cattle grazing in cultivation areas.

Changing gendered roles in agricultural production

In response to the socioeconomic transformations of the Upper West and Savannah regions, gendered roles and norms in agricultural production are slowly undergoing change. During the long dry season from October to May, it is a typical practice for men to travel to the forest agroecological zones of Ghana in search of other income-earning opportunities before returning to their villages for the rainy season (Luginaah et al. 2009). However, with the expansion of artisanal small-scale gold mining in northern Ghana, these patterns of mobility are changing. For young men, in particular, this work known as 'galamsey' is a means of accumulating financial capital to support future aspirations, such as restarting or furthering their education, securing professional employment or establishing their own business (Osei and Yeboah 2023). These shifting mobility patterns have led to labor shortages in agricultural production in their home communities, where women are increasingly stepping in to fill the gaps.

As more women take on roles in agricultural production, the traditionally masculine identity of 'farmer' is slowly shifting. Women, who were once largely considered secondary producers (Apusigah 2009), are now more likely to be regarded as farmers in their own right.

These shifting gender roles have also been enabled by development interventions led by state and non-state actors that have specifically targeted women for agricultural support. In many of these programs, the inclusion of women farmers is a key criterion for project implementation. For many women in the seven districts studied under the REACH-STR project, participation in Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), which emerged from the 'susu' schemes in Ghana (Amponsah et al. 2023), has also been an important mechanism for accessing agro-inputs and machinery, such as hiring tractors. These trends facilitate women farmers to complete tasks that were previously seen as masculine domain.

Woman farmer planting pepper in Volta Region, Ghana (*photo*: Barbara van Rijn).

According to one female farmer, "*Ten years ago, we used to carry firewood from this community to Tumu, the municipal capital, to sell to get some money. However, now, because of the Women's Voluntary Saving and Loans Group, we usually save little by little, and when it is time to plough, we also use that money to rent a tractor to plough a hectare or two for ourselves. Even with the firewood, we don't carry it on our heads anymore; we use donkey carts or MotorKings to transport them to Tumu for sale.*"

However, it must be noted that access to farm inputs remains a challenge for women who either do not hold membership with the VSLAs or do not come from wealthy households. Alare et al. (2022) discuss how poorer members who cannot make the required weekly financial contribution can be excluded from the VSLAs. Without financial resources to access labor-saving technologies such as tractors, women have to rely on the support of men to complete these tasks. With farming becoming increasingly individualistic, women also find that they cannot draw on collective practices such as the reciprocal exchange of labor that existed previously.

Gendered differences in cropping patterns have also been shifting, and with them, certain aspects of agricultural production that ensured income autonomy for women. Traditionally, these elements of agricultural production gave female farmers varying degrees of independence to have control over decisions, in contrast to other aspects of production, where decision-making power rested with (and was usually subordinate to) the male members of the household. An example of this is '*gari*' or cassava processing and trade, which has traditionally been a significant economic activity for women (Asare-Nuamah et al. 2024). With increasing cattle grazing on cropland – a phenomenon farmers increasingly have to deal with – farms have begun to move further afield to continue production. As cassava is bulky and difficult to transport, this has led to a drop in the amount of cassava cultivated in the region, diminishing women's livelihood opportunities associated with this crop.

Another key area in which gendered cropping patterns have undergone change is in groundnut production. Traditionally, men were more involved in the production of staple food crops, while women found income autonomy in the production of vegetables and legumes. However, the increasing commercialization of groundnut is changing these dynamics. In addition to supplying household needs, groundnut is currently a major cash crop in northern Ghana, often fetching more income than cereals (Kotu et al. 2022). As a result of this trend, male farmers have become significant producers of groundnut in recent years, expanding into this previously largely feminized crop. On the other hand, with the construction of earthen dams and a borehole network, 'garden' cultivation of small plots of vegetables during the dry season is increasingly emerging as a source of income for women, many of whom tend to remain in the village during the dry season.

Other livelihood opportunities available for women are also evolving. Processing dried nuts from shea trees has been a traditional livelihood activity for women in the region. In recent times, international demand for 'shea butter' has increased because of its use in the global cosmetics industry (Katsekpor et al. 2024), expanding the number of livelihood opportunities in shea nut processing and picking. A woman involved in shea nut processing stated, "*We have a better selling price for shea butter than before. Our women used to pick shea nuts, but it was of no significant value to them because there was no reasonable price for it. The only thing they could do with it was to process it into shea butter which fetched low prices. Now, our women at least have reasonable prices for their shea nuts because many companies come around, even giving advance payments*."

At the same time, amidst the labor shortages caused by the increasingly long-term mobility of young men, care work – already overwhelmingly associated with women – has expanded into new domains. In the communities the REACH-STR project worked with, livestock rearing, traditionally performed by men, has increasingly become a feminized role, especially in terms of rearing small ruminants. However, when it comes to the sale of livestock, it is the men who continue to oversee decision-making.

Continuing challenges facing women engaged in agricultural production

While gendered roles and cropping patterns in agriculture are changing, decision-making on key resources continues to be largely vested in the hands of men. Although access to resources has increased for female farmers, control over these resources tends to remain with the male members of the household. As one female farmer explained, "*Because I am a woman, I cannot sell lands, but I wish I could because sometimes I am in much need of money, but I cannot sell anything. With the culture around here,*

if I want a piece of land to do something and there is a small boy in the house, he must grant me permission before I can do anything on that land. Women do not have even limited rights over lands in this part of Ghana. No matter the age of a boy in my household, if he is the only male, then I need his permission to do anything on the land."

Land inheritance in northern Ghana is patrilineal (Apusigah 2009) and land distribution is controlled by either the head of the family or the traditional head of the lineage or clan, typically male. While women are entitled to use rights through their husband or family and often manage their own land, they cannot inherit land themselves.

Diminishing soil fertility, which many of the communities in the Upper West and Savannah regions have experienced over time, can potentially pose additional challenges for women, who are often allocated less productive lands for cultivation (Antwi-Agyei and Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2021). Ahmed et al. (2016) describe how, in the semi-arid regions of Ghana, women were given lands situated in valleys for cultivation, where only rice could be grown. However, when these lands produced good harvests, they were taken over by male farmers, either to be sold or to be cultivated by themselves.

In all the communities the REACH-STR project worked in, decision-making in community spaces has traditionally been dominated by men. Thus, the inclusion of women in political decision-making within the household and village levels has been a specific objective in development interventions led by state and non-state actors in recent years. While this has resulted in some changes in increasing the inclusion of women in decision-making spaces, progress has been slow.

Alare et al. (2022) highlight how discussions with agricultural extension agents on what crops to cultivate often involve only the head of the household and the owner of the land, excluding most female farmers. The REACH-STR project confirms these findings (Okem et al. 2023). Male farmers had greater access to weather information, including through the 'information van' (which provided weather information through loudspeakers) and mobile phones. Female farmers, on the other hand, relied mostly on fellow farmers, the television or the internet for weather-related information. Male farmers could travel to the information van using their motorbikes, which most female farmers did not have access to.

The impact of social transformation processes on gendered reproductive labor

While women continue to take on more labor in agricultural production, their reproductive responsibilities have remained rigid and largely unchanged. Although women are increasingly involved in more masculine spheres of agricultural production, with a few minor changes, they also find that in order to negotiate greater autonomy in agricultural production, they must continue to fulfill their roles within the reproductive sphere, often leading to an increase in the amount of labor they shoulder daily.

Women farmers from the Wovoguma community irrigating using basins, Northern Region, Ghana (*photo*: Barbara van Rijn).

Many of the young and older women in the households continue to be responsible for cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, and taking care of children and sick relatives. Although connectivity to the electricity grid might have expanded, labor-saving technologies for household tasks are not prevalent. Women find themselves having to walk long distances to fetch firewood and water where boreholes that deliver water have malfunctioned or are inadequate to meet community needs. Where men participate in transporting firewood and water, it is largely through mechanized means, typically using bicycles and motorbikes. Overall, while the share of reproductive labor undertaken by men has slowly increased, it is often irregular and still not considered the norm.

As a female farmer expressed: "*The girls complain much that their work in the house is tedious. In some houses, when the girls return from school and finish eating, they are immediately tasked with searching for water without resting. With this, some girls become so tired that they cannot even do their homework in the evening before going to bed. At times they get back to school the following morning to do their homework.*"

Policy implications

This brief demonstrates how gender relations, particularly connected to the roles and norms of female farmers in agricultural livelihoods, are shifting in the northwestern and Savannah regions of Ghana. Women are increasingly recognized as farmers in their own right and their autonomy in performing the role of a farmer has grown in certain contexts. Gendered cropping patterns, as well as other livelihood spaces, have also been shifting, opening new opportunities for livelihood-making while constraining others. At the same time, women's labor contributions in the reproductive domain have continued to largely remain the same or have even expanded in some instances. With women increasingly taking on farming roles considered more masculine domains previously, these changes have increased the labor burden on many women. Constraints faced by women in engaging in agricultural production have also been slower to change, including control over key resources such as land.

While gender and equity are increasingly integrated into development interventions, these efforts often view social and gender norms and roles as static and linear and do not recognize and respond to the fluidity of changing gender and social norms. The brief underscores the importance of taking into consideration changing gendered roles and the opportunities and constraints associated with them in designing policies, programs and project interventions. This is necessary to better support female farmers to address the challenges they face and to expand their agency in participating in agricultural livelihoods and non-farm livelihood alternatives. It is also important to consider the changing nature of work women are undertaking in the agricultural and domestic spheres to ensure their well-being in the context of social transformation. This consideration becomes particularly important in light of the anticipated and ongoing challenges to agricultural production caused by climate and environmental change.

Policy recommendations

- Women are increasingly taking on primary roles in the agriculture sector in the Upper West and Savannah regions. While these changing gender roles are increasing women's agency as farmers, they add additional burden to their household responsibilities. Development actors must be conscious of this dynamic and ensure that empowerment programs do not place additional burden on women.

- Although access to land has increased for women in the context of this study, women still play limited decision-making roles. Control over key resources will increasingly determine how women, who now undertake a larger share of agricultural production, can respond to a changing environment. Development interventions should incorporate elements that increase women's decision-making power on land-related issues and support women in gaining equal rights to key resources, including land, and to exercise this right.

- Farmers in the Upper West and Savannah regions of Ghana are primarily dependent on rain-fed agriculture that is highly vulnerable to climate variability and extremes. It is critical to support female farmers in building resilience against the impacts of climate change. It is also important to support women transition to other non-farm livelihood activities in the context of the rapidly increasing impacts of climate change on agriculture.

Woman farmer picking weeds in Michel Camp, Accra, Ghana (*photo*: Barbara van Rijn).

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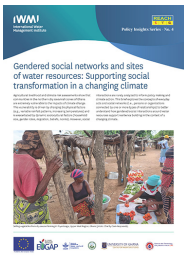

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Project

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