

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN GHANA'S AGRICULTURE SECTOR: INSIGHTS FROM THE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE INDEX

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## Key messages

- Gender disparities in agriculture persist in Ghana, particularly in land ownership, credit access, and decision-making power, limiting women's productivity and contribution to food security.
- The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) has been instrumental in revealing these gender gaps in northern Ghana, but similar data are lacking for other regions, hindering national-level policy responsiveness.
- Targeted interventions, such as securing land rights for women, improving access to financial services, and promoting participation in farmer-based organizations, are critical to advancing women's empowerment and achieving gender-equitable agricultural development.

## Why Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Matters

In Ghana, the agriculture sector is fundamental to economic growth, poverty reduction, and food security. Women make up more than half of the sector's labor force, working as producers, processors, and marketers of agricultural produce across different value chains. Despite their important role, gender disparities in access to land, production inputs, information, and formal credit limit their economic productivity, as does the additional challenge of juggling both domestic and agricultural activities (CCFAS 2021). Traditional norms that dictate property rights, decision-making processes, and intrahousehold food allocation also make women more vulnerable to food insecurity. Thus, achieving women's empowerment and gender equality is key to improving agricultural productivity and meeting goals on

poverty reduction and food security.

Designing evidence-based gender-sensitive policies and programs requires knowledge of the gaps between women and men in agricultural households. However, this can be challenging without standardized metrics that help researchers and practitioners measure and understand these gaps, as well as understanding how they influence other outcomes. Developing the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), a standardized measure of women's empowerment (Alkire et al. 2013), and including it in large-scale surveys has considerably improved the availability of gender-disaggregated data in Ghana.

This brief explores how WEAI has been applied in Ghana and highlights key findings to inform future policy directions.



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## Measuring Women's Empowerment: The Role of WEAI in Ghana

Since 2012, WEAI has been used to generate evidence on women's empowerment in agriculture in Ghana (Malapit et al. 2014). Based on a review of available publications, WEAI has likely been applied in at least 15 cases. The original and abbreviated WEAI assess empowerment across five domains of empowerment, including production, resources, income, leadership, and time. These tools have largely been applied in population-based surveys conducted through the United States Agency for International Development's Feed the Future (FTF) Zones of Influence (ZOI) in Phase 1 (baseline survey, 2012; midline survey, 2015) and Phase 2 (baseline survey, 2020; midline survey, 2023) in northern Ghana (districts of the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions and selected areas of Brong Ahafo). Compared to other areas of Ghana, the higher levels of poverty, food insecurity, and maternal and child malnutrition experienced in the north make it a particular focus for development agencies and the country's government. As such, most research using WEAI has focused on northern Ghana. A recent review by IFPRI researchers (Myers et al. 2023) found that Ghana ranks highest among all African countries for publications using 2012 FTF WEAI data; globally, it is ranked second after Bangladesh. These publications have contributed both nationally and globally to the growing body of evidence linking agriculture to nutrition outcomes through women's empowerment.

## What the Data Show: Key Findings from Northern Ghana

Evidence on women's empowerment in Ghana largely comes from population-based surveys conducted under the FTF initiative in northern Ghana. Due to the lack of population-level surveys implemented in other regions, understanding of women's empowerment in other parts of the country is limited. In the Phase 1 FTF ZOI in northern Ghana, the baseline (2012) and interim (2015) assessments applying WEAI found that 72.5 percent and 86 percent of women, respectively, were disempowered, which was more than twice the level among men (Malapit et al. 2014; Zereyesus et al. 2018). Fewer than 30 percent of women achieved gender parity within their households. Key areas contributing to women's disempowerment in agriculture included access to and decisions about credit, ownership and rights over assets, and control over income indicators.

In the Phase 2 FTF ZOI baseline (2020) and midline (2023) assessments, more than half of women were classified as empowered, with empowerment levels rising slightly from 51 percent, though the overall change was not statistically significant (ICF 2024). At the regional level, however, women's empowerment increased significantly in the Upper East region from 49 percent to 70 percent but declined substantially in the Northern region from 47 percent to 27 percent. These shifts highlight the importance of disaggregating data by region to capture subnational trends.



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Domain-level data from the 2024 ICF report provide further insight. In the production domain, economic participation remained high but declined significantly from 84 percent to 79 percent, with a shift from livestock participation to cash crop farming and an increase in women's input into production decisions from 95 percent to 97 percent. In the resource domain, asset ownership declined, particularly ownership of land, housing, and transport, while ownership of small consumer durables increased. Access to credit dropped from 45 percent to 39 percent, and fewer women reported input into credit-related decisions (from 94 percent to 88 percent). In the income domain, nearly all women had input into income use, with significant improvements in decision-making over income from livestock (from 78 percent to 93 percent), food crops (84 percent to 93 percent), and major household expenses (72 percent to 82 percent). The leadership domain showed increases in women's participation in community groups, especially in religious, civic, and producer groups. However, in the time domain, fewer women reported manageable workloads (the share working less than 10.5 hours per day declined from 72 percent to 65 percent), and average work hours increased, especially for cooking and caregiving.

Further analysis of the 2012 FTF dataset shows persistent gender gaps. Zereyesus (2017) found that three-fourths of women in their study population were disempowered in access to and decisions on credit and rights over agricultural assets. Yokying and Lambrecht (2020) showed that about 11 percent of women identified as primary landowners, as compared to 83 percent of men. In qualitative assessments conducted in the Upper East region (2017) using WEAI qualitative guides, men were reported as having greater control over large and valuable assets, owing to the patrilineal systems in northern Ghana (Bryan and Garner 2022). For instance, women access land through their husbands or children, or by renting or begging within their communities (Boxes 1 and 2). In cases where women have access, they are more likely to manage smaller plots than men, use land of lower quality, or contribute as unpaid workers to the family's land (Box 2). Rural Ghanaian women's land ownership has been linked with greater participation in agricultural production decisions

(Yokying and Lambrecht 2020).

These findings clearly show persistent gender disparities in northern Ghana's agriculture sector and some of the prevailing norms that halt progress toward gender equality. This evidence is critical for guiding gender-sensitive programming and informing policy action by Ghana's government and development partners to close gender gaps in agriculture.

### BOX 1

"When your father dies, you don't have anything there. But when your husband dies, and you have children, if the children inherit the land, it is like yours, you can use it."

**Source:** Focus group discussion with women (Bryan and Garner 2022).

### BOX 2

"If you don't have money and go and beg, the land they will give, you will collect but it is just useless land. And when you collect [and cultivate] that land, even what you consume, it will not take you anywhere unless you buy [food] supplement...the one who has his own land, the land that is fertile, he farms on that. And, if you go to him and beg, he gives you the infertile land. If he is a troublemaker and you get fertilizer to apply, but after knowing that you did apply fertilizer and land is now good, the next rainy season he will come for it...he has also stopped you from farming there."

**Source:** Focus group discussion with women (Bryan and Garner 2022).



## Benefits of Women's Empowerment in Agriculture

The Ghana 2012 FTF WEAI dataset has meaningfully contributed to expanding the evidence base on the relationship between women's empowerment and food systems outcomes. For instance, Malapit and Quisumbing (2015) found that women's empowerment and participation in credit decisions were positively associated with women's dietary diversity. Ross and colleagues (2015) showed that ownership, access to credit, group membership, and leisure time had a positive association with women's health status, while autonomy in production had a negative association, indicating that some trade-offs may exist with empowerment indicators. Tsiboe and colleagues (2018) found that empowerment in control over the use of income improves the availability of nutrients (carbohydrate, protein, and fat) and lowers food poverty within the household. The results demonstrate the importance of addressing key areas of disempowerment in agriculture in Ghana and highlight potential areas of focus for targeted interventions.

## What Works: Program Lessons from Pro-WEAI Applications

Programs focused on increasing access to resources, training, and credit for women in agriculture were evaluated using a more recent adaptation of WEAI, the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI). For instance, the Small-Scale Irrigation and Women's Empowerment in Northern Ghana project (led by International Development Enterprises [iDE]; 2015–2018) provided motor pumps, training, credit, and agricultural inputs to women and men farmers in the Upper East Region (Bryan and Mekonnen 2023). The intervention involved 42 "trust" farmers' groups, each consisting of five farmers, selected randomly through a lottery system. Each group was expected to share the motor pump among its members. An impact evaluation using pro-WEAI showed that the iDE intervention did not affect women's overall empowerment, but it increased the number of asset categories owned by women (Bryan and Mekonnen 2023; Quisumbing et al. 2022). Women who owned pumps also gained income from the sale of irrigated crops, which they used to purchase food and cover health expenses for the household.

In Ghana, farmer-based organizations are a primary platform for government-farmer interactions to boost farmers' access to resources and technical services. Abdu and colleagues used baseline pro-WEAI data to examine the relationship between women's participation in these groups and empowerment within the context of the Women's Agripreneurship Sustainability and Scale Up project in the eastern region of Ghana (2019–2022), which was funded by the International Development Research Centre. They found that rural women farmers who were mem-

bers of farmer-based organizations were three times more likely than nonmembers to be empowered in general, especially in areas such as access to and decisions on credit, attitudes about domestic violence, travel to important places, and gender-equal households (Abdu et al. 2022).

These examples demonstrate successful applications of WEAI in Ghana and highlight potential areas for scale-up in future programming, such as supporting women with agricultural assets and leveraging farmers' groups to strengthen women farmers' access to credit, training, and agricultural services.

## Policy Recommendations: Enabling Ghana's Women Farmers to Empower Themselves

Using WEAI in population-based surveys in northern Ghana and in more recent programs has generated valuable insights on women's empowerment in the agriculture sector. These studies identified three potential areas for policy interventions to support women engaged in agriculture. First, women's secure land rights and ownership must be ensured by tackling deeply ingrained cultural practices and attitudes to allow women equal access to land for agricultural purposes. Second, facilitating access to financial services and credit for women farmers is important to enable them to invest in agricultural resources and assets and have greater control over income. Third, it is essential to promote increased representation of women in agricultural cooperatives and associations that provide them with access to agricultural services. Because the existing evidence has been largely limited to northern Ghana, expanding WEAI data collection across other regions would enable policymakers and researchers to gain a deeper understanding of women's specific needs, compare differences across settings, and identify potential strategies to improve women's empowerment and gender equality throughout the country.

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