



**Topic: BARRIERS MILITATING AGAINST WOMEN’S ACCESS TO
AND USE OF LAND.**

(A Case Study in the Northern region of Ghana)

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality has been a dominant terminology within our vocabulary in the wake of the 21st century with human rights advocates and feminist scholars pushing for equal opportunities for both men and women within the society which we live today. The issue of gender in access to land has called for attention from gender activists, world bodies, land administrators and development associations alike in a bid to address this concern in development which tends to have a direct impact on the livelihood and security of individuals both in rural and urban areas (Adolwine & Dudima, 2010). As a key assumption within the concept of Gender and Development, emphasis is further laid on the unequal distribution of rights, resources and power within the society where women are seen as active agents, not passive recipients of development. These developments have been necessitated given the fact that women's ability to access and make use of lands is a key panacea to liberating the women out of poverty, promoting food security and endorsing gender equality according to Dery (2015).

The Northern region of Ghana over the years has been infamous with regards to the exclusion of women from the ownership and use of lands mostly for agricultural or other economic activities which could generate returns and this is evidenced in a study by Yokying & Lambrecht (2020) who cited that landownership is strongly linked with social and economic power. According to Williamson (2021), traditional authorities who are the primary custodians of lands oversee 80% of the lands in the country with the governance system and regime used by these authorities being largely defined by the prevailing cultural lineage and system of inheritance. 20% of these lands are public lands vested in the President of the country for public use. According to the author, this cultural system of inheritance in the Northern part of Ghana has been predominantly patrilineal giving men the exclusive right to the ownership of land with the women being unable to access lands except through members of the family who are males. Thus, the ability of women to access and use lands has been associated and strongly linked with their marriages and the lineages of their husbands ripping off these women the needed liberty and right to pursue economic prosperity by engaging actively in farming and other land use which generate revenues and returns. In a study conducted by Dery in 2015 exploring the intricacies of women's access to and use of land resources in the Upper West region of Ghana, findings indicate that the existing traditional framework has been quite pivotal in enhancing men's access to lands while at the same time fuelling women's unequal access and control over land. This problem of excluding women from accessing land resources has in essence been an issue to grapple with in overcoming the contemporary problem of a gendered access to land.

This study thus seeks to underscore some of the barriers which militate against and contend with efforts to empower women and ensure equal access to land in the Northern part of Ghana.

1.1 THE CASE STUDY OF NORTHERN GHANA

“Northern Ghana is Ghana's problem region”, wrote Dickson (1968). But today, the question still stands to be answered, ‘what has changed?’ ...

The Northern Region, one of Ghana's sixteen regions is situated in the northern part of the country and has been the largest region, with an approximate land area of 70,384 square kilometres representing 31% of Ghana's area. The Northern Region of Ghana is divided into 14 districts with Tamale being the region's capital Ghana Statistical Service (2012). The system of inheritance is highly patriarchal, however in recent times, the Upper West Region has seen changing trends in climate variability, migration and the emergence of Covid-19 which have transformed the region in terms of the existing gender roles. Women now adapt by forming farm cooperatives, making, selling and trading goods and taking on additional farming responsibilities traditionally performed by men (Wahabu & Patel, 2020). According to the authors, income and well-being have strong linkages with agriculture. Hence farmers grow maize, yam, groundnuts, sorghum, rice and other crops, consume and sell their harvest in order to maintain food security and generate income for the home. Women's access to land has thus been crucial and essential to empowering the women economically such that they are less reliant on their husbands for their basic provisions. The study therefore seeks to ascertain the barriers which lead to the exclusion of women in accessing and using land within the Northern region of Ghana.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Feminist Political Ecology

Rocheleau *et al.*, (1996) give a framework for analysis the issues of gender where gender is considered to be a central variable influencing access to and control of resources, and the struggle of men and women to attain and sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, as well as the prospects of achieving ‘sustainable development’ within any given society. In adopting feminist political ecology as a concept, emphasis is laid on the connection between ecology, politics and gender and development essential to shed light on the diverse sources which make females

oppressed and the various forms in which resistance from women take place (Bryant, 1998, p. 86).

In the view of Sundberg (2015), Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), evolved as a subfield where Political Ecology is married with the Feminist Theory and its objectives to provide a framework for analysing which is built on the argument that ecological problems must be understood and analysed relating them to political economy and vice versa. Therefore, feminist political ecologists propose gender in relation to the individual's class, race and other relevant axes of power, in shaping the access to and control over natural resources, including land. Commenting on the issue of patriarchy, one major barrier inhibiting women's access to and use of land as expounded within feminist political ecology, Harding (1986) and Haraway (1991) argue that patriarchal gender norms determine the basic notions of who counts as a producer of knowledge, what should count as knowledge, and the means of producing knowledge. Thus, the exclusion of women in knowledge production renders the experiences of these women invisible or presents them as an inferior group. This is evidenced in the processes of decision making on the land tenure systems which determine access of these women to land. The exclusion of women in decision making tends to hamper the registration of women's concern on access to natural resources.

Furthermore, feminist scholars leading development projects address the ways in which poverty is deepened and feminized as a result of women being rejected as agents of change and environmental transformation (for instance, as managers of natural resources) and the producers or bearers of environmental knowledge. For instance, Carney (1992) demonstrated how differences between men and women in access to and the use of land and other resources rights play out with development in The Gambia, (Africa). The concept of feminist political ecology therefore seeks to lay emphasis on the dynamics which lead to the exclusion of women in matters pertaining to the environment and advocates for involvement of women in decision making as well as their roles as agents of change. This in essence would not disadvantage these women thereby not creating winners and losers in the society.

3.0 BARRIERS MILITATING AGAINST WOMEN'S ACCESS TO LAND

There quite a number of factors which lead to the exclusion of women from having access to and owning lands in the Northern region of Ghana. In her book, "The Limits to Scarcity: *Contesting the Politics of Allocation*", Mehta (2013) rightly expounds one of the root of male

dominance over land ownership and affirms that the imbalanced access to and control over fixed and finite resources are fuelled by exclusion, unequal gender relations and other powerful relations within the society rather than these occurring naturally. Hence the exclusion of women which result in the prevailing inequalities are gendered and have unnaturally instigated determinants. Barriers which bring about the menace of exclusion are due to either cultural or social reasons mostly through the gendered social norms and stereotypes which are constructed socially. The resultant discrimination and exclusion in access to land by women is further evidenced in the creation and existence of inequalities within the society. A large body of literature (eg. Touray, 1998; Ayua, 1998; TejanCole, 1998; Kevane & Gray, 1999; Benneh *et al.*, 1995; FAO, 2002a and Salifu, 2005) have placed emphasis on cultural bias and discrimination against women in having access to land for development across the African continent particularly sub-Saharan Africa. Identified barriers to accessing land by women in Ghana are discussed as follows.

3.1 Cultural Barriers to Ensuring Access

Cultural barriers militating against women's access to land are prevalent in the northern part of Ghana. This is due to the fact that control over land resources commonly follow a gender segregated pattern based on the prevailing traditional norms which limit the land rights of women resulting in lands being concentrated in the hands of men with the women being excluded. Dominant among these factors is the land tenure systems which are culturally defined within the traditional system of land ownership within the given societies. Land tenure systems are of core importance when it comes to access to land resources by women in the northern region of Ghana. By definition, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2002b) refers to land tenure as "the relationship existing among persons in the society, as individuals or groups, with regards to land whether legally or customarily defined." Land tenure system in the Northern region of Ghana appear to be highly patriarchal where men mostly have access to and own lands for various purposes.

This patriarchal system of land ownership has not only increased men's control over land distribution, but has also increased women's dependency on men since these women are no longer able to engage in the farming activities or other economic ventures which require land ownership. This renders the women to be economically dependent on their husbands for basic needs which they could have provided for themselves assuming they had ownership to lands.

Reports from FAO (2002a) on the security of women's land rights, indicate that the lack and absence of sufficient provisions for women to hold land rights independent of their husbands or male relatives hampers efforts to offer security for women. These women can sometimes only gain access to land to takeover roles their husbands left behind mostly farms, when their husbands migrate to cities like Kumasi or Accra in search of greener pastures (Wahabu & Ptael, 2020). In such instances, the least said of unmarried women, the better.

Furthermore, traditional customs play a crucial role in determining the allocation of lands within communities. The traditional system in the Northern region of Ghana is characterized by male dominance in access to land, leaving the females with the options of only accessing land if these women have male relatives or are financially empowered to pay for or buy the land from the traditional custodians mostly the chiefs and other traditional authorities and sub chiefs. In the view of Scalise (2012), traditional customs have tendencies of generating social justifications for inequalities which arise between men and women within the society making women more susceptible to the menace of land insecurity as compared to the men. This is evidenced in the justification of men as the head of the family and subsequently the manifestation and need for a patriarchal system of inheritance.

The plights of women in access to land are mostly worsened due to the form of mediation which is done through the lens of the customary laws which appears to be dependent on the holding and control of land by these traditional authorities in retaining their traditional territories. In Ghana and some parts of Africa for instance, during marriage when the husband gives money to his wife's father as a bride price, as supported by the traditional belief system, he tends to consider that the woman is his 'property' due to the payment he offered. This belief system underpins reasons why within the traditional regime of land ownership the woman is prohibited from owning land on her own but needs to instead rely on paternal relation like her father or husband before she can own one. In recent times however, there have been advocacies championed through sustained and collective negotiation, with emphasized placed on the wider benefits to be accrued by community through secure and good land rights for women. This advocacy resulted in the Dagomba women in the northern region of Ghana gaining secure rights to customary land, from which hitherto they were excluded. This has been the form of changed much desired within the entire northern region of Ghana Scalise (2012).

3.2 Social Barriers to Ensuring Women's Access to Land

Social actors within the society have influence on the access of women to land resources for various agricultural and other economic. Quoting from IFAD (1998), women can expect to own at best temporary use of plots of land from their husbands whereas unmarried women rarely have access to land where widows appear to lose their access to lands except in instances where they had male children. This dependence of women on men for land acquisition appears to further reinforce the perception of women as a weaker sex who should not claim equality with men. This is affirmed by the findings of Duncan and Brant (2004) from the Volta Region of Ghana. In their report, men strongly dominated decision-making processes and leadership in the region. The men were thus seen as natural leaders, whereas women were considered to be too weak and vulnerable to be good leaders or major decision-makers. Decisions made about the land tenure systems therefore mostly favour the men since they take the final decisions.

A point worth mentioning as a major barrier obstructing women's access to and use of land is the lack of education of women within the society resulting in the underrepresentation of women in decision making process which equally affect their lives. For example, as cited by Scalise (2012), the opinion of women tends not to be factored or counted while making decisions concerning both men and women within the community and the political system of the nation at large. A prominent cause of this according to the author is due to the paltry representation of women at the decision-making tables, coupled with limited literacy, lack of knowledge about laws and policies related to lands and the lack of confidence needed for these women to voice their opinions for the desired decisions and changes in land ownership. This goes a long way to put the women in a disadvantaged position and inhibit their progress and efforts to empower these women economically since their voices are not heard to address their needs and concerns. The ripple effect is the creation of a gender gap between the men and women due to unequal access to land within the society. With education being essential, the lack of education puts most women within the disadvantaged group which makes them unable to exercise and demand for their formal rights legally.

In a study "*Women's Access to Emerging Urban Land in the Sissala East District in Northern Ghana*", by Adolwine & Dudima (2010), when respondents were asked to give reasons why few women owned land, the lack of finance, high land prices and custom and traditions which make the female a subordinate to the male, were the dominant reasons given. There exists an

intersectionality and differentiated discrimination against both poor women, unmarried and uneducated women within the society.

The above observations confirm views from the Marxist and socialist feminists highlighting linkages of gender oppression with other variable axes of power such as social status and class, thereby rejecting patriarchy as the only source of women's subordination. These barriers essentially are to be addressed if we desire a society devoid of gender inequalities with equal access to both resources and opportunities.

4.0 THE WAY FORWARD IN ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS TO LAND BY WOMEN

There have been clarion calls for equality for an equitable society where there is equal access to resources and opportunities by both men and women. To ensure gender equality within the Northern region of Ghana, the study hereby recommends the following in a bid to bridge the gender gap which exist due to unequal access to land by women.

Firstly, there should be increased formal education for the women to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge in order to be economically empowered and to also take part in decision making about the tenure and system of land ownership. As indicated by in a study by Adolwine & Dudima (2010), educated women have better prospects to access lands due to the fact that they are more likely to gain employment, hence having the financial means to pay for land and more importantly are well placed socially to influence their husbands and family members in accessing land.

A point worthy of mention is the fact that education the women would go a long way to ensure gender inclusiveness in policy and decision – making which is important to increase the opportunities both at central and local government levels in decision-making roles especially concerning land related matters. In her book, *“Women's Role in Economic Development”*, Boserup (2013) lays emphasis on the fact that educated women play crucial roles in development and should thus be engaged within the spheres of economic development. This is essential if we are to achieve a society devoid of gender inequalities.

Secondly, there is also the need to empower women financially so that they can be equally economically dependent and less reliant on their male counterparts for their basic necessities. For instance, increasing commercialization of land provides opportunities for women to overcome socio-cultural barriers in accessing land. It is also important and empirical that

women are empowered financially through access to District Assembly loans or bank credit to boost their micro businesses. This in essence would help to empower these women economically.

Finally, there is the need for improvement in land management through collaboration with local institutions to provide women the opportunity to have a formal regime to affirm their ownership rights. Land tenure reforms, policy formulations and statutory legislation are clearly necessary to overcome the cultural barriers limiting women in access to land and other resources. Typical outcomes viewing through the lens of ecofeminism, rather than a reduction, there should be an increase in women's control over resources when there is in place, an inclusive formalisation of access and use rights for both men and women in the society. This is essential for a more secure system of land tenure to enable indigenous women have access to these lands and to also protect their communities against external forms of extortions of their land resources.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The prevailing gender inequality in the Northern region of Ghana caused as a result of the unequal access to land has casted a long shadow thwarting efforts to ensure gender equality. Barriers faced by women in accessing land for farming and other economic majorly include unfavourable land tenure systems, lack of education to empower these women and the underrepresentation of women in decision making.

The issue of women's exclusion from use and access to land and other resources appears to be accentuated by the emerging concept of Gender, Environment and Development which places special focus on institutions, tenure, access and property rights in a bid to ensure gender equality and the inclusiveness of women in matters pertaining to the environment. The prospects the concept of GED holds for development thus include the protection and improvement of women's access to and control over resources as well as increased attention given to property rights and not undermine women's existing use rights. Women in the northern part of Ghana and the country as a whole can ensure their representation in decision making and further strengthen their land tenure security through a variety of means. Some of these means include nurturing a good alliance with the traditional chiefs, religious leaders, professionals, land agencies and other groups in the community. By also holding stakeholder forums, training women on their land, property and inheritance rights and holding community conversations to raise the awareness of land and property issues among traditional and religious leaders are crucial and important. These recommendations when undertaken would go a long way to bridge the gender gap occurring between men and women in the northern region and Ghana at large.

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