

GRASSROOTS SISTERHOOD FOUNDATION:

Supporting Equitable Land Rights and Food Security in Ghana ^{*1}

BACKGROUND

In October and November 2009, the Huirou Commission held Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with approximately sixty women in the communities of Gburmani, Kpatinga and Wamale within the Tolon-Kumbungu, Savelugu-Nanton, and Tamale regions in northern Ghana, where extreme poverty and food insecurity are widespread. The area faces recurrent food shortages due to a combination of failed crops, floods, conflict, and the loss of human capital as a result of high rates of distress-related out-migration.



Women reported sharp increases in food prices that severely strained household resources. Some women reported paying three times for the same amount of food compared to three years earlier. Women reported having access to only one meal per day, and malnutrition rates among children are high. In Ghana as a whole, one-third of all children are under the age of five are stunted. Anemia, a blood condition associated with inadequate food consumption, also afflicts over 80% of children under five in Ghana, and 59% of women between the ages of 15 and 49.²

Although agricultural yields have increased in some areas, lack of access to land has severely restricted agricultural investment by smallholders and marginal farmers. Without security of tenure, farmers are less willing to invest in land. But without investment, farm productivity is limited - soils may become degraded, and opportunities to increase production, such as irrigation, are missed. Soil infertility, erratic rains, climate change impacts, and high costs for farm inputs and foods reduce incomes and hinder grassroots solutions strategies to alleviate poverty. Communities in northern Ghana are in a chronic cycle of insufficient food security.

The Situation of Women

Women are especially vulnerable to extreme poverty and food insecurity in northern Ghana. The burden of planting, maintaining, harvesting, and marketing crops most often rests solely on women. Despite their crucial role in providing for household food security, women are excluded from decision-making on natural resources and other property matters. Discriminatory property laws and customary inheritance practices prevent most women from owning or controlling land. Inferior social status and lack of access to productive assets are major contributors to high rates of illiteracy, exclusion and

¹ This case study was co-authored by Jeffrey Kaloustian, JD, 2010 Huirou Commission Food Security Fellow, and Fati Alhassan, Executive Director of the Grassroots Sisterhood Foundation.

² Ghana 2008 Demographic and Health Survey. *available at* <http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&q=Ghana+2008+Demographic+and+Health+Survey>.

intergenerational poverty. Early and forced marriages are also a common experience of women and girls in this part of Ghana, many of whom have limited skill to support their livelihoods outside agriculture.

Effects of Food Insecurity

Rising costs of food and farm inputs such as seeds and fertilizers have so strained household resources that many women are struggling from day to day to secure basic necessities. Women participating in the FDG reported being in the position of having to beg and borrow. Food insecurity negatively impacts the health and education of the area's population. Child malnutrition is the leading killer of children in the area. As food prices soar, families are unable to afford school fees and children are kept out of school. Essentials such as detergents, fuel, and transportation are out of reach. "We are just running after food for survival," said *Abiba Abdul-Rahaman*.

Migration among Young Men and Women

Conflict, harsh conditions, poverty, and unemployment have caused many younger men and women to leave the area in search of work. The population is dwindling rapidly, with many communities being inhabited primarily by older people. Migration rates among males are particularly high, which increases the burdens placed on women and can lead to irresponsible parenting patterns. *Fati Abu* asks "have you seen any young people in the community? They have all left because they are strong [enough] to work on the big farms in the south. They go there during the lean season so that the food available will be enough for the smaller children and the aged. This community has suffered a lot."

FINDING SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

The Grassroots Sisterhood Foundation (GSF) was founded as in 2000 to support young girls and women suffering from injustice due to negative cultural practices. In 2007 it began women-led community dialogues designed to empower poor women in rural communities in Northern Ghana. GSF consists of a network of over 3000 women from 75 grassroots women's groups.

Capacity Building



In collaboration with local partners including the local office of the national Legal Aid and the Center for Human Rights and Advocacy, GSF facilitates regular trainings for women on their legal rights to land, property, and inheritance. These trainings are especially effective in empowering local women, most of whom are illiterate and otherwise unable to access legal knowledge or assert their rights. GSF also organizes trainings for community based paralegals to assist poor women in Northern Ghana to assert their legal rights. It also works to establish Community Watchdogs,³ committees of

trusted community women that are able help other women with legal issues, including domestic violence and disinheritance.

³ The Community WatchDog is a grassroots developed model for community based intervention into property grabbing. GSF, as part of the Women's Land Link Africa initiative, facilitated by the Huairou Commission, was able to learn this model and adapt it to their own communities.

Education and Advocacy

GSF strives to tackle the customary practices that leave women vulnerable to chronic hunger and poverty. By its nature, this work requires outreach efforts and community dialogues that effectively address women’s issues and concerns in the community. Aimed at sensitization and awareness-raising in the traditionally male-dominated societies, GSF facilitates community conversations among diverse stakeholders, including women’s groups, traditional leaders, local government agencies, religious and opinion leaders and the youth. The organization has been successful in forging unique linkages with village/tribal chiefs by cultivating connections with the chiefs’ wives and daughters—the revered “*Pognap/Napaga and Magazia.*”

Action Research

GSF conducts active research on women’s obstacles to building sustainable livelihoods and resilient communities. The organization mapped issues relating to women’s access to productive assets and the initiatives women have used over the years to access land. Using a questionnaire, focus group discussions, and personal interviews, GSF is investigating the cultural and customary barriers that affect women’s access.

Sharing and Learning Experiences



Peer to peer exchanges are a primary means for GSF to diffuse knowledge and share best practices among women’s groups. GSF engages in Peer to Peer Exchange as part of the Women’s Land Link Africa (WLLA) an initiative of the Huairou Commission, which links together women’s organizations from 13 countries in Africa working on land and housing issues. Fati Alhassan, GSF’s President and founder, and other leaders in GSF have traveled to other Africa countries, such as Tanzania,

Zambia, and Kenya to share experience on facilitating local dialogues. Through local, regional, and international conferences and workshops, GSF has shared knowledge on land policy, food security and women’s rights. National exchanges between GSF and groups in southern Ghana have provided opportunities for collective development of solutions to common problems, such as the migration of young girls to the south for income purposes- often with tragic results.

GSF also provides resources for local women to move around to other villages in the northern regions, and enables them to identify common issues and to share coping strategies to build resilience. Peer exchanges build solidarity and reduce women’s feelings of isolation.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

GSF’s work has produced many tangible results for the women of rural Ghana. The GSF network consists of 3000 women from 75 grassroots women’s groups, facilitating the dissemination of knowledge and best practices throughout. Through awareness campaigns on property and inheritance rights and the forging of strategic partnerships, GSF is directly supporting women’s secure access to land. In turn, women are increasing production and building resilience to food shortages, price shocks, and other calamities. GSF also supports savings schemes for women, actively campaigns against domestic violence, and tackles community health issues through its *Home-Based Caregivers Alliance.*

Knowledge-Building on Land, Property, Inheritance Rights

Many women of Northern Ghana are unaware of their rights because of high rates of illiteracy, social exclusion, and physical isolation. In an effort to increase women’s economic empowerment, GSF conducts regular trainings on land, property, and inheritance rights. GSF members evaluated the Ghana Land Administration Project using the Gender Evaluation Criteria developed by the Global Land Tool Network.⁴

Strategic Partnerships

Working with tribal Chiefs, religious leaders, professionals and land agencies, youth and women’s groups alike, GSF’s local to local dialogues and stakeholder forums have produced new alliances for the purpose of improving grassroots women’s access to and control over land. The new alliances have been effective in challenging the onslaught of corporate land grabs in the region. These dialogue processes are opening up space for women’s voices in critical land and resource issues that have a direct impact on their long-term food security and hence development opportunities. Women reported having more confidence to demand equity in family and community inheritance practices.

Increasing Women’s Access to Land

GSF’s knowledge-building activities and community dialogues are producing tangible results for women in Northern Ghana. By helping women secure access to and control over farmland, GSF is supporting sustainable agriculture-based livelihoods and household food security.

A GSF-led community dialogue enabled eighty women from a settler community to consult directly with an traditional chief presiding over a large traditional area on their land access issues. Following the dialogue, forty women gained title to land.

In another example, GSF facilitated a community dialogue that led to seven women’s groups obtaining 120 acres of land for block farming. With GSF’s help, the women’s groups approached traditional leaders about securing access to a plot of land. Customarily, whoever is first to bring virgin land under cultivation has security of tenure. The women requested, and were granted virgin land in a desirable area, i.e. not too flood prone. With block farming, land is controlled collectively and not by individuals, making the land tenure more secure and less susceptible to interference by males.

Linking Local Women with Support for Small-Scale Agriculture

To support sustainable farming practices and agro-based livelihoods for area women, GSF links its members with farmer’s support groups and governmental ministries that can provide them with support. By formally registering local groups with Ghana’s Ministry of Agriculture, GSF helps women access training, seeds, fertilizers, technical services and other critical forms of smallholder support.



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BUILDING RESILIENCE

GSF’s advocacy focuses in large part on repealing negative traditional customs of property and inheritance that have shackled

⁴ The Global Land Network Tool (GLTN), an initiative of UNHABITAT, is focused on establishing a continuum of land rights and the creation of innovative, pro-poor, scalable and gender-sensitive land management and land tenure tools to be globally disseminated. See www.gltm.org.



women into transgenerational cycles of extreme poverty, malnutrition, indebtedness, and social exclusion. By mobilizing women, including widows and young girls, around security of land tenure and equitable inheritance practices, GSF is improving the livelihood prospects of women in the area. By confronting cultural discrimination and women's limited control over assets, GSF enhances the capacity of local women to tackle chronic food insecurity. Security of tenure incentivizes investment in the productivity of land and directly provides women with greater means to assure long-term access to adequate food to feed their families.

GSF's awareness campaigns empower local women to articulate their needs and to forge strategic partnerships for change. Community participation reduces women's isolation and vulnerability and promotes inclusive solutions to pressing community problems. Empowering grassroots women to participate in decision making processes increases their ability to challenge and change existing power relationships that have placed them in positions of subordination.

GSF's inspiring work demonstrates that development outcomes are greatly improved when grassroots women's contributions are recognized, reflected and supported.

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