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Akua Opokua Britwum, Angela Dziedzom Akorsu, Loretta Baidoo

Women's empowerment for sustainable rural livelihoods:

Voices from selected communities in Ghana

The International
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and Decent Work

Akua Opokua Britwum (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She has researched and published in the area of gender and labour relations and is currently researching comparing the postcolonial development strategies of Ghana and Tanzania. Her most recent publication is: Britwum Akua O. (2018) Organizing Rural Women in Ghana since the 1980s: Trade Union Efforts and ILO Standards in Boris, E; Hoehtker, D and Zimmermann, S (Eds) Women's ILO, Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present. Lieden: Brill.

Angela Dziedzom Akorsu (PhD) is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Her current research is around informal economy organising, decent work along agricultural value chains as well as gender and rural women's livelihoods. Her most recent publication is: Akorsu, A. D., & Britwum, A. O. (2018). Trade Union's Response to Decent Work Deficit among Agricultural Workers in Ghana. In C. Scherrer, & S. Verma, Decent Work Deficits in Southern Agriculture: Measurements, Drivers and Strategies (pp. 251-272). Augsburg Munchen: Rainer Hampp Verlag.

Loretta Baidoo holds a Mphil in Development Studies from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She previously worked as a research intern at the Centre for Gender Research, Advocacy and Documentation, University of Cape Coast. She is currently a Project field Officer with the Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, University of Ghana. Her research interests are in gender, livelihoods and women's studies. Her most recent research is on improving the livelihoods of women fishers along Ghana's Coast, as well as collective organizing among waste pickers in Ghana.

Editorial Board

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Contact Address

Prof. Dr. Christoph Scherrer

ICDD – University of Kassel, Germany

Mailing address: Mönchebergstr. 19, D-34109 Kassel

Visitors' address: Kleine Rosenstr. 3, D-34117 Kassel

Contact: felmeden@icdd.uni-kassel.de

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Akua Opokua Britwum², Angela Dziedzom Akorsu³, Loretta Baidoo⁴

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² Corresponding author Email: aobritwum@ucc.edu.gh; Mailing Address: Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies, School for Development Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana.
Phone +233 208150869

³ Email: aakorsu@ucc.edu.gh

⁴ Email: loretta.baidoo@stu.ucc.edu.gh

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Abstract

Agricultural interventions are designed on certain assumptions of empowerment that do not necessarily address the livelihood constraints of the rural women they set out to support. This is a failing that might be due to the omission of women's voices expressing their understanding of empowerment and its relation to existing gender orders. Using primary data from the Upper East and Northern Regions in Ghana, we explored women and men's notions of the processes and outcomes of empowerment. We began by understanding the basis of women's disempowerment and confirmed its location within agricultural production relations that granted women limited access to resources. Respondents recognised all the main dimensions of power: *within*, *with*, *to* and *over*. The restrictions of women's empowerment to the provisioning role on condition that it did not usurp male *power over* women limited intervention's ability to provide true empowerment for women. But signs of increasing transfer of women's *power within* into group action and male acceptance of women's expanding spheres of influence indicate that some grounds for true transformation in the future exists.

Key words: *agricultural interventions, disempowerment, livelihoods, power, rural women*

List of abbreviations

CEGRAD	Centre for Gender Research, Advocacy and Documentation
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
DWA	Decent Work Agenda
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FNV	Federation of Netherlands Trade Unions
GAD	Gender and Development
GAWU	General Agricultural Workers Union
IITA	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture
KPI	Key Persons Interviews
L3F	Lifelong Learning for Farmers
NR	Northern Regions
ORGIIS	Organisation for Indigenous Initiatives and Sustainability Ghana
RIRO	Regional Industrial Relations Officer
RWOP	Rural Workers Organisation Programme
SHGs	Self-Help-Groups
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UCC	University of Cape Coast
UER	Upper East Region
URBANET	Urban Agricultural Network, Ghana
UWR	Upper West Region
WID	Women in Development

1 Introduction

Rural women's inhibited access to and control over productive resources in agriculture has been documented in several studies (Doss, Truong, Nabanoga, & Namaalwa, 2012; Britwum, 2009; Apusigah, 2009). Most of these studies have been concerned with the implications of resource limitations for women's livelihoods and the corresponding threat to rural food security and poverty alleviation. In response, interventions to better women's situation in rural agriculture have been designed, targeting resource restrictions and related issues. The results of such interventions have been mixed: women adopting such interventions were few and women who chose to be involved registered low outcomes. Some of the findings of such research report, for example, that off-season livelihood diversification interventions targeting women were unable to overcome constraints posed by lack of access to productive resources (Baidoo, 2017). Some interventions were noted to have left women worse off in terms of their labour burdens and in others participating women have been pushed further into hardships from indebtedness due to the need to purchase new seed varieties and agricultural inputs (Doss, Truong, Nabanoga, & Namaalwa, 2012).

Explanations for the unsatisfactory outcomes of interventions for rural women's livelihoods have included failure to account for women's unpaid labour. Studies outlining resource limitations revealed a strong connection between land tenure systems and agricultural labour recruitment and rural women's likelihood to adopt agricultural interventions (Britwum, Tsikata, Akorsu, & Aberese, 2014; Byerlee, Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2009; Doss, Truong, Nabanoga, & Namaalwa, 2012; Geda, Kimenyi, & Mwabu, 2001; Olagunju & Adebayo, 2015). Women's positions within the agricultural production systems have been noted to determine the extent to which the outcome of such uptake of interventions will be beneficial (Britwum & Akorsu, 2016; Lemba, 2009). This is a fact that is sometimes informed by trade-offs that women make to safeguard existing gendered orders (Britwum & Akorsu, 2016; Mullaney, 2012). Other studies blame project conception derived from the erroneous assumption that standardized policies stand to benefit women and men equally (Yoong, Rabinovich, & Diepeveen, 2012; Byerlee, Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2009).

Several interventions ride on the goal of empowering women, seeking to address gender imbalances within targeted communities. These interventions assume their own conception of empowerment which do not necessarily meet the objective of easing the livelihoods constraints of rural women. Neither do they comprehend the community specific gender dynamics. Kabeer (1999) notes, however, that agricultural interventions need to incorporate the choices of women, their achievements, or 'realised capabilities', emerging from their strategic actions. The inclusion of women's voices, expressing their preferences, and interests are deemed important in devising gender responsive policies (O'Neil, Foresti, & Hudson, 2007). This makes the need to detail rural women's perspectives on empowerment a key feature in the design of interventions to their benefit O'Neil et al. (2007).

This document presents findings from a study that sought to generate an understanding of gendered agrarian dynamics and rural women's participation in agricultural interventions. The overarching objective of the study was to explore rural women's perceptions of empowerment as well as the connection between livelihood interventions and their empowerment. Additionally, the study sought to outline their notions of empowerment and its supporting indicators. To meet these objectives the study set out to answer questions about the value placed on rural women's positioning within agricultural production, their perception of empowerment and men's view of an ideal man to link up with an empowered woman. Ultimately the study was interested in addressing how interventions meet the empowerment needs of rural women.

The rest of the paper is organised into four sections. Section two describes the methodological decisions made in the course of the data gathering. Section three, titled, exploring empowerment and women's positioning reviews literature, while findings are discussed in the fourth section. The conclusions are contained in fifth section.

2 Research methodology and related issues

Research seeking to unravel rural women and men's meanings of empowerment has historically adopted a qualitative design. This fact is buttressed by research scientists who explain that the qualitative approach lends itself better to engaging its participants in deep conversations to comprehend local dynamics (Neuman, 2011; Ritchie, Lewis, Mcnaughton, & Nicholls, 2013). This study was interested in constructing meaning out of participants' views derived from their lived experiences. The study's population as a result, were female and male farmers in the Upper East (UER) and Northern Regions (NR) of Ghana involved in agricultural interventions. Agriculture is the main source of livelihoods in the above mentioned regions. A significant proportion of the population is engaged in the cultivation of food and cash crops, and the rearing of small ruminants and fowls for home consumption and income earning. There is, in addition, some rearing of large livestock like pigs and cattle. These regions are known for the presence of several interventions some led by state institutions, NGOs and private entities. They were mainly directed at crop and livestock production (Britwum & Akorsu, 2016; Baidoo, 2017). Additionally, the cultural dynamics in these regions presented more exciting possibilities for a study seeking to understand rural women's conception of economic empowerment (Apusigah, 2009). The predominant ethnic group in the NR is Dagomba and in the UER, largely Kassena-Nankana. Both reckon descent through patrilineage. This determines who can access land and control its use. There are, in addition, culturally determined and upheld norms about female and male on and off farm tasks that feed into notions of entitlements to productive resources (Apusigah, 2009).

The selection of study communities was determined by the existence of a mix of agricultural interventions and the nature of the sponsoring organisations in operation. The main determining factor was interventions based on group formation. Three main organisations that met this criterion were purposively selected based on the length of the interventions and the variations in focus. Other factors were the nature of the organising institution and modes of organising. The selected organisations were the General Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU), Urban Agricultural Network, Ghana (URBANET) and Organisation for Indigenous Initiatives and Sustainability Ghana (ORGIIS).

The choice of GAWU was informed by the union's widely acknowledged activities in organising rural agricultural workers in Ghana since the 1970s. Established in the 1945, GAWU is a workers' union affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Ghana. It organises workers in formal enterprises as well as rural and urban informal economy. GAWU organises and supports women and men workers in rural agriculture through its Rural Workers' Organisation Programme (RWOP). Key RWOP projects that GAWU has implemented in recent times include the Decent Work Agenda (DWA) project in collaboration with Federation of Netherlands Trade Unions, and the Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) project, implemented in partnership with Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in Canada. The DWA project aims to support GAWU's established union structures, systems and processes at national, district and community levels to enhance union benefit to workers in the Rural Informal Economy. The L3F project of GAWU in partnership with COL seeks to empower rural smallholder farmers, especially women, to increase their productivity and enhance livelihood security. The project, in addition, works to consolidate the membership of GAWU SHGs, increase women's access to leadership and decision-making roles and responsibilities, and support members to start appropriate agro-based enterprises with support from financial institutions and their own savings.

The second organisation, URBANET is a local NGO, a partner of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). Set up in 2003, it operates mainly in eight districts in the NR. URBANET seeks to implement interventions that build capacities of communities to secure food and nutrition in an environmentally sustainable manner. It does this using indigenous knowledge patterns to explore the potential and opportunities available in local communities to build resilience. Its specific activities include capacity building focusing on the transfer of yield-increasing technology to farmers. It runs, in addition, a livelihood programme that supports women's groups with microcredit and offers skills training in shea butter and rice processing, seed production as well as entrepreneurial and business management.

The third agency, ORGIIS is a community-based organisation formed in 2011. ORGIIS seeks to facilitate and support the application of indigenous knowledge for sustainable human development for poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation. Its main target groups are women and the youth, whom it seeks to empower through entrepreneurial skills and capacity development to sustain and conserve natural resources. Its focus is based on the belief that once people earn income from a natural resource their predisposition to protect it will be enhanced. The main project activities of ORGIIS are agricultural and alternative livelihood improvement, entrepreneurial skills development and enhancing tourism potentials. ORGIIS operates in UER only.

The study targeted the two regions in northern Ghana where the three organisations operated. While GAWU's projects were being implemented in all the 3 northern regions, that of URBANET and ORGIIS were based in NR or UER respectively. Three communities with GAWU's SHGs were selected in the NR and UER, based on their performance and level of women and men's involvement in group activity. The selected study communities for GAWU were Doba, Kongwania and Korania in UER and in the NR, Kampong, Libga and Zoggu. Communities selected for URBANET were Kapong-Ayele and Tunti both in NR and for ORGIIS it was Viana in the UER. Research participants covered were women and men members of GAWU, URBANET and ORGIIS Ghana. The two Regional Industrial Relations Officers (RIRO) of GAWU, Head of programmes at URBANET and the Executive Director of ORGIIS Ghana as well as identified persons in leadership roles within the community groups were purposively selected as key persons to provide their expert insights on group activity and impact.

Primary data gathering methods were Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Person Interviews (KPIs). Key person interviews were used to cross-validate group perspectives and augment information about project goals and history. For each GAWU group, one in-depth interview was conducted with secretaries, chairpersons and women organizers (*mangajia*), and two FGDs women and men in separate sessions. Key officers of both URBANET and ORGIIS Ghana as well as members of their supported groups were also interviewed. A total of 146 participants, made up of 81 women and 65 men participated in the 15 FGDs, 14 in-depth interviews and key person interviews.

Field work was conducted from 14th September 2017 to 21st September 2017 using FGD, as well as key person and individual in-depth interview guides. To draw out voices about empowerment the instruments examined the respective positions of women and men within existing agricultural production systems, their conception of empowerment, specifically their decision-making strategies to navigate their livelihood challenges, identified changes in women and men's positions and community views on such changes. Data was gathered manually through note-taking and electronically by recording discussions in interview sessions with the prior consent of participants.

After transcription and editing, the data was initially subjected to open coding, allowing themes to emerge from the findings, advised by the main research questions. The themes derived from open codes were then subjected to axial coding to refine the emerging trends, based on Kabeer's empowerment framework which views empowerment as a series of actions that produce positive social change for the socially marginalised (Kabeer, 1999; March, Smyth, & Mukhopadhyay, 1999). The derived themes to guide data analysis are those considered essential elements of empowerment the expressions of various forms of power, within, with, to and over. The study was interested in women's decision-making approaches for making livelihood choices.

For ethical considerations, levels of consent present included the choice be part of the research, to be recorded and to be photographed. Thus, the purpose and scope of the study was introduced and discussed before each interview session and research and only those who accepted were covered either as individuals or in the FGDs. The research participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Where research participants objected to electronic recording only notes were taken during interviews. An additional ethical consideration was research rigour for upholding academic integrity. Measures employed included data triangulation, collecting data from multiple sources, group members, executives and project officials. Multiple methods FGDs and KPI helped provide information from persons located in different positions within the groups.

3 Exploring empowerment and women's social positioning

Feminists are credited with the appearance of the term “empowerment” in the field of international development studies and practice (Calvès, 2009). The term was introduced as a new approach to the role of women in development, carried in the work of feminist researchers and activists’ group, the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) (Moser, 1989). Empowerment was introduced to counter liberal feminists’ Women in Development (WID) policy agenda that women’s reintegration into mainstream development will lead to gender equality. Radical and socialist feminists challenged the WID agenda and offered alternative views within the Gender and Development (GAD) and Women and Development theoretical frameworks. Both strands of feminists criticized WID induced projects which refused consistently to question structures at the base of women’s subordination. Such projects, they explained, failed to address existing inequality and offer any chance of social redistribution (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995). The DAWN sponsored Empowerment approach called for a consideration beyond the inequality between women and men, that focused on the political spaces where inequalities thrive. GAD adopted a dual approach focusing on women’s material conditions and social positions, as well as the patriarchal structures and ideas that defined and maintained their disempowerment (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995).

3.1 Empowerment as a process and outcome

Various theoretical positions conceptualise empowerment either as a process – a factor, or as an outcome-achieved goal (Tandon, 2016; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Anderson & Funnell, 2010). When empowerment is conceptualised as a process, the focus is on actions made, and how choices influence these actions. Here empowerment is said to involve several actions, enabling people's capacity to make choices and to transform the choices into desired actions and outcomes (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). For authors like Anderson and Funnell (2010) who see empowerment as a process, the purpose is to increase people's ability to think critically and act autonomously, independent of prescribed social norms and values. For Tandon (2016), empowerment as a process includes group action, organising, to increase self-reliance and to assert independent right to make choices and to control resources. Kabeer (2005) adds a further dimension to the discussion on empowerment as a process when she presents the flipside of empowerment, disempowerment. For her, disempowerment occurs when people are denied opportunities to make choices, explaining that the very "processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such a capacity" is empowering (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13). This suggests that empowerment occurs only within the context of disempowerment. Persons who structurally wield power from their socially privileged positions do not need to be empowered.

Our interest is gendered disempowerment and how this affects women's ability to make choices to influence their life chances. We note that women over time, have internalised their lower claim to productive resources. This in turn affects their life chances. Quoting Schuler and Kadirgamar-Rajasingham, Tandon (2016) notes that:

... the causes of women's inferior status and unequal gender relations are deeply rooted in history, religion, culture, in the psychology of the self, in laws and legal systems, and in political institutions and social attitudes, if the status and material conditions of women's lives is to change at all, the solutions must penetrate just as deeply (Tandon, 2016, p. 8).

This introduces the need to explain empowerment as a process for challenging existing structural relations. For Batliwala (1994), structural relations sit at the core of empowerment. Its conceptualisation should then be presented as a process of challenging power relations to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce gender discrimination and social inequality. A process which works towards enabling poor women to gain access to, and control over resources. Bennett (2002) offers such explanation by describing empowerment as the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable, the institutions that affect them. Such individuals and groups develop the ability to alter structures that affect them by acting as purposive agents.

Empowerment is therefore achieved when individuals or groups progress from a state of inequality to equality. Attaining this state of equality turns empowerment into an outcome, an achieved goal. Thus, people shift from a submissive position to a state where they gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where they were previously denied. An indication of their empowered status (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) highlight further that the empowering process occurs at various levels in an incremental manner until the final goal is achieved. As an outcome then, empowerment is said to have been attained when an enhanced sense of self-efficacy occurs and individuals and groups exercise agency to gain control over their lives and external resources. It is in its form as an outcome that empowerment, according to Batliwala (1994), can be measured. Measuring empowerment can be done by determining how much influence previously disempowered people are beginning to exert over situations at the very base of their welfare. Determining levels of influence require that we understand the nature of a key component of empowerment, power. An exercise we engage in the next section.

3.2 Power in empowerment

Our earlier discussions noted that the general conception of empowerment highlights two aspects: a process and an outcome. As a process, we noted its personal dimension where individuals defy the accepted norms and values, which uphold their unequal status. Empowerment, we also noted, involves group action to transform choices into actions and alter discriminatory and exploitative structures. Group action turns the disempowered into agents capable of acts leading to achievement of an empowered status. This leads to the second dimension of empowerment as an outcome, the result of a combination of activities undertaken by disadvantaged actors to claim their space and gain control over all or most aspects of their lives. We have noted that the second dimension that allows empowerment to be measured is an important consideration for our discussion in this paper.

To comprehend and provide a deep analysis of women's understanding of empowerment, we must unpack its constituent parts. To do so, we must first determine the appropriate conceptual tools for this exercise. It is in this light that we come to examine the composition of the term and how the various parts can be engaged. In defining empowerment, a few terms come up regularly. Here we consider the term power as dominant (Moser, 1989, O'Neil et al., 2007). These, we apply in our analysis of data in this paper. We have noted that the process of empowerment begins with disempowerment. A fact that draws attention to an important concept at the centre of our discussion: power. In exploring power in empowerment in gender relations, writers like Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands, Alberti and Mercado, (1999) note its different scopes, as '*power over*', '*power from within*', '*power with*' and '*power to*'.

We begin with *power over*, because women's domination is derived from the exercise of '*power over*'. It is accompanied by the very process that gets them to accept social positions of subordination to men. Townsend et al. (1999) draw from Lagarde's understanding of power which describes '*power over*' as consisting 'primarily in being able to take a decision which will affect someone else or in acting to force, confine, forbid or prevent' others from engaging in certain activities. Such power provides its holder the ability to dominate, degrade, force an action, or even assume the right to punish and withhold from those they control, critical resources to well-being. '*Power over*' is usually accompanied by use of force, sometimes physical, economic and/or social, and mostly backed by socio-cultural institutional rules and norms. In the exercise of '*power over*' women, Hardy (1996) explains, that they are often not left completely powerless. They

can and do manipulate existing situations to their interests. Women are sometimes able to persuade men to believe they both have similar interests or that some ideas emerging from them were originally owned by the men. Some scholars have interpreted such actions as agency, though for others insofar as such actions do not challenge the status quo, women cannot be said to be exercising agency. This brings us to the next dimension of power, '*power within*'.

Dealing with disempowerment and livelihood constraints calls for exercising some power or at least, taking some actions to mitigate the impact of existing disadvantages people are experiencing. Over time, as individuals continuously defy boundaries that demarcate socially accepted behaviours, there comes a recognition of some innate capacity. This is what is perceived as '*power within*'. For some scholars, '*power within*' serves as self-empowerment (Fitzsimons & Fuller, 2002; Kroeker, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). Beliefs about individual abilities bring about efforts that result in self-actualisation. '*Power within*' yields acceptance and respect for the self and others in similar social situations (Williams, Seed, & Mwau, 1994). '*Power within*' points to the consideration that empowerment derives from individual efforts. A situation leading Fitzsimons and Fuller (2002) to demand that interventions purporting to promote empowerment recognise the inherent capacities and capabilities of women and focus on their ability to increase their self-reliance and internal strength (Moser, 1989).

For empowerment to yield social change, individuals must connect with others in similar situations to overturn their disadvantage. An action that draws on '*power with*'. Described as the capacity to achieve set goals with others. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) note that '*power with*' offers a stronger position to confront social inequality than the other forms of power. This dimension of power calls for collective action, where communities with similar experiences of disempowerment build networks based on trust to facilitate their actions for changing the social systems and structures that support the discrimination they suffer. The group is built of individuals with self-generated power. According to Townsend et al. (1999, p. 92) *power with* develops only in the presence of *power within* and it is the latter form of power that allows individuals to come together to form a group for pursuing a common purpose. A situation that leads them to assert that '*power within*' supports the development of '*power with*'. Thus, there can be no '*power with*' if its base, '*power within*', has not been developed, it is the attainment of *power within* that individual women use to mobilise to form and exercise group *power with*.

When '*power within*' combines with *power with*, efforts generated require '*power to*' for effecting social change. For Pitkin (1972) it is '*power to*' that renders individual and group actions, the capability to carry out social change. Sen (2003) and Nussbaum (2000) support this position by asserting that '*power to*' gives individuals the opportunity to gain access to a full range of human abilities and potentials. Therefore, when individuals gain the ability to acknowledge options, make decisions, and follow through their decisions they can be said to exhibit the '*power to*' dimension of power (Lukes, 1974).

Our discussions so far reveal how the different components of power are connected. Women's empowerment requires the ability to wield '*power within*' to build self-confidence; establish '*power with*' others to achieve a common purpose. They can take decisions to effect change through '*power to*'. Thus, the process of empowerment does not preclude those exercising '*power over*' others. Here, we draw attention to Rowlands' (1998, p. 30) observation that, '[t]he empowerment of women is... not just a women's issue but is a gender issue which necessitates an examination of gender relations, and which, ultimately, will require changes of men as well as of women'.

In outlining the power in empowerment, we noted their interconnectedness. The emerging task is how to apply the constituents to distil meaning from the data gathered in the field. To do this we want to explore first perceptions about women's sphere of decision-making and its connection to their control over resources. Second, we examine conceptions of empowerment by outlining which notions of power are at play. We shall later determine the implications of such conceptions for gender equality.

4 Giving expression to empowerment: findings from the field

This and other sections that follow present our findings from the field. We begin with discussions on conceptions of women's spheres of influence and how these determine their place in decision-making. This we explored as areas under women's control, where they had the autonomy to act without permission. We were interested in women and men's place within prevailing gender orders. We used decision-making as a proxy to determine spheres of influence. Thus areas where women could make decisions without consulting men were their zones or spheres of influence. We also outlined persons who had authority to grant others permission to exercise their roles and examined signs of change in existing gender practices as women's spheres of influence expanded. In the sections that follow, we discuss prevailing conceptions of empowerment by trying to understand how power is conceived and the levels of empowerment women are believed to have. The last section explores men's reaction to signs of women's empowerment and the supposed benefit or otherwise they derive from the emerging trends.

4.1 Women's social positioning

To understand women's social positioning within the study communities, we tried to sketch their resource access especially in agricultural production. Our findings were consistent with early studies on women's unequal access to critical agricultural resources. Research participants in all the study communities underscored women's limited access to productive resources like land, capital, technologies and labour. The real reason, they explained, was that men were considered the land owners and women, their assistants. Women did not, therefore, have full entitlement to agricultural resources. *"Women are our helping hands, they should not have resources"* (FGD, Male, Doba). There was one area though that women recorded better access than men. This was in relation to credit. It was explained that women were turning out to be more creditworthy than men as this narration reveals:

... in my village where men and women collected loan together as a group, ... all the women had paid, and the men had not. Now they are giving the loan again and they said all the men should pay, so the women had to make a case, they had to go after the men to make them pay up. Most development agencies who give loans and credit have seen that strength in the women, so now they like giving credit more to the women. This is better than to give individual men loans because their repayment is very bad (Male, KPI, Navrongo).

Picture 1: Female village loans and savings group meeting in Libga, Ghana



Source: Loretta Baidoo

Picture 2: Group savings's safe to collect and store money in Ligba, Ghana



Source: Loretta Baidoo

Though women's access to credit was improving, constrained access to the main resource, land, still hampered women's ability to develop fully their independent income earning activities. Women's social status within the study communities was therefore seen as secondary to men, an indication of their levels of disempowerment. It is within this background that we go on to explore the main questions set for the study. These, as explained earlier, covered notions of women's empowerment subscribed to by women and men as well as the corresponding male figure evolving in response to such women.

Picture 3: Female village loans and savings group meeting in Libga, Ghana



Source: Loretta Baidoo

4.2 Women and spheres of influence

Our findings revealed that women's spheres of influence in the study communities were very strong around their gender roles. All research interactions with both women and men, asserted that women need no permission to undertake domestic chores or caring responsibilities, no matter the place and time of day. *If my wife wants to carry water, she will not tell me. If women are going to clean the house they will not ask for permission* (FGD, Male, Libga). *If they are going to gather the garbage, bathe the children and themselves they will not inform anybody* (FGD, Female, Libga). Their autonomy to act without permission did not extend to matters unrelated to the performance of domestic chores. Generally, in all instances where women had to leave their home for tasks not associated with their caring roles they were obliged to seek permission. Failing that could attract sanctioning. *'If she is going to the meeting she will inform you that she is going for the meeting. If she doesn't then you can stop her'* (FGD, Male, Libga). Women also acknowledged the need to seek permission over issues such as joining groups or adopting an agricultural intervention. Research participants at the Kongwania, the female FGD, explained that ... *we all seek permission from our husbands and informed them even before joining this group* And the mixed group at Viana confirmed this. *'Actually, there is nothing you do in the house that you don't tell your husband'* (FGD, Mixed, Viana). All women were under obligation to seek permission for undertaking non-domestic activities.

The main reasons why women had to seek permission for certain actions were related to the fact that they lived under the authority of the heads of households. Research participants explained *'you can't just do anything without telling your husband or father because they are the head'* (Kongwania female FGD). Heading a household gave men authority over its members. For others, it was due to the fact that the man *'brought you to his house'* or it was just a matter of showing respect. Some explained that it was a question of men's superior knowledge over certain affairs especially over issues related to land. Other reasons advanced were practical: the need for support in case of business failure or to track women's investment performance. *'But before you start any business like the rice processing, you must inform him first. Because if you don't inform him and there is a debt, who are you going to consult? So normally a woman will have to inform her man that oh this is the business activity that I want to invest in, if he grants her permission then that is fine.'* (FGD, Mixed, Viana). Women were said to require supervision from males, especially to guard them against business failure. Thus, women had to:

... account for what has happened in the season, so they will tell whoever is the head of their household, in this case the husband or the elder brother, that I harvested this number of bags of maize and he will ask how many acres did you plough? Then you mention two, then he will say if it is two, then you have lost something. ... They then will go to the records to check costs, like how much the ploughing cost, the chemicals, the labour, they will determine how much they are making, whether it is profit or loss. (FGD, Female, Zoggu).

Persons who had the authority to supervise and grant women permission to undertake activities outside their spheres of influence were a range of relations, both women and men, whose authority sources were their age or gender. Husbands were not the only persons women had to seek permission from: others were their fathers, brothers, fathers- and brothers-in-law, male friends of their husbands as well as their own sons. The women were older, like mothers, mothers-in-law. Fathers appeared to have control over both women and men. Men were subject to their fathers' influence. *Your father must know first before ... your wife* (FGD, Male, Kampong). Zones of influence were therefore circumscribed by others with *power over* whose authority was derived not only from gender but age as well. Thus, older men had *power over* younger men and likewise older women exercised *power over* younger women. Male spheres of influence however, expanded to include all females and younger men, whereas older women's authority extended only over younger women. Sources of influence were either ascribed or attained. Ascribed sources were derived from blood relations like fathers, mothers, brothers and sons. Attained sources were based on social relations like age, marriage and even friendship with husbands. Men had complete control over agricultural productivity.

Where women could make decisions on agriculture-related activities, they were limited to the purchase or sale of certain livestock. Even in instances where they undertook to farm independently, they still had to account to their husbands. And where they bought a piece of land, they still required permission to determine what to plant.

4.3 Women's expanding spheres of influence

Notwithstanding prevailing practices restricting women's spheres of influence there were indications of change triggered by actions by both women and men. Women's spheres of influence within their households were expanding, enabled by their access to independent income, as well as education and capacity building received from interventions. Other enablers were formal education. Having an independent income gave women some freedom to make decisions without consulting their husbands. Research participants explained that *'they use the money to buy books for the children even when their fathers don't know that they came to their mothers to ask for books. Some women can cater for their children's medical bills without informing their fathers because sometimes the husbands don't have money and since the women are into business they have money to pay the bills'* (FGD, Female, Kongwania). There appeared to be more relaxation in terms of women's autonomous operation over income, mainly their independent earnings, and sometimes even that of their husband's. Generally, women have full control over the income they earn.

There were indications that some men were beginning to break existing gender barriers, allowing for joint decision-making with their wives, thus expanding women's traditional zones of influence. The reported trend was greater consultation and joint decision making between husbands and wives. Some men for example insist on involving their wives in all major decisions affecting the household. Viana mixed FGD insisted that: *is not good to go and be doing something that your wife is not aware of*. Some women and men felt that women were better at keeping money. According to males at Korania FGD, *'Our wives are 'bankers' if you have good relations with your wife she keeps your money, unless you have an account with the bank.'* Females at Kongwania FGD, felt it was expedient that women keep household income because they are always at home *'... men, they are always outside the home'* they explained.

There were caveats to the observed trend of greater consultation with women. Some respondents made a distinction between decision-making, consultation and information sharing. Some insisted that women should not be lead decision-makers. Women could offer their opinion on certain decisions but it remained men's prerogative to accept such views. Participants in the male FGD at Doba explained that wives could advise their husbands against certain decisions only on condition that they could provide alter-

natives. Some were sceptical about women's ability to respect confidentiality, should their husbands trust them with sensitive information. They concluded however that it was all about how much trust married couples had in each other. Korania males at their FGD stated that signs of trust between married couples was on the increase and *'more men trust their wives and seek to cooperate with them. Such men always want to consult their wives.'*

We observed from the study that evidence of *power within* on the part of women was facilitated by additional resources, inner capabilities and personal achievements, especially in income earning. Women were showing signs of using their *power within* to increase their spheres of influence. They were expanding their spheres of influence by making decisions about children's welfare, school and medical treatment without consulting their husbands or others in authority. There were limits to the observed expansion of women's decision-making abilities and their spheres of influence. Men had the right to initiate the decision-making. Thus, some men might consult their wives before they purchase land, but these women had no say in the use to which the land would be put. Women had no *power over* to ensure their husbands' compliance to decisions they have jointly taken. There were prohibited areas where women were never consulted or even provided information, and this was over religious rituals where women were required to provide food and beverages for the rites. Others with *power over* exercised their authority in ways that reinforced male authority, whether it was *power over* exercised by women over women or by men over men. Male *power over*, whether exercised directly by them or by older women, prevailed in ways that limited women's spheres of operation.

4.4 Conception of Empowerment

In this section, we explore research participants' notion of power and their conceptions of an empowered woman. Generally, research participants conceived empowerment around independence, based on inner strength and access to an autonomous income. Being empowered, according to the participants, entailed an inner capacity, a demonstrable ability to make decisions, express oneself at meetings, especially on matters of community welfare. An empowered woman was presented as one who can *'take decisions and has knowledge about things around her'* (Libga KII Male). A recognition of *power within*, having a voice was regarded as an important ingredient for empowered women, which voice they exercised based on their stock of independent knowledge devoid of influence. It also included the ability to control others.

Economic independence was one significant factor used to identify empowered women. Here empowerment was equated with having a secure livelihood. Such women were not dependent on their husbands or, in the case of single women, on others for their economic needs and those of their children. *'Yes, you know if they can be independent, if it is a woman she doesn't leave all her burden on the husband'* (Male, KPI, Tamale). Such a woman demonstrated the ability to earn and manage an independent income.

To be truly empowered, women had to direct their earnings towards supporting their husbands' income provisioning responsibilities in their households. *'It means doing good things like she can pay school fees, take good care of the children, and provide food for the house. Such a woman has power.'* (Male, KPI, Libga). For some, wealth gives power only if one has children to spend other income on. Research participants went on to measure women's empowerment through the number of children in school. In communities like Zoggu and Libga, research participants explained, *'So, any child who is in school is proof that the mother has money.'* In fact, research participants viewed wealth without a family as pointless.

Research participants made a distinction between women's empowerment as individuals and as a group. Some insisted that empowerment begins at the individual level as inner capacity. At the individual level *'... power is the strength you hold on to'* (Female, KPI, Kongwania), and the ability to make decisions on one's *'own without any influence'* (Female FGD, Tunti). An indicator of empowerment shows in women who can sit together at meetings and speak out at such meetings. Others insisted that individual power was meaningless unless exercised through a group. At the group level it was explained that *'power is togetherness in working'* (KPI, Tamale). Group formation enhanced the empowerment potential of women. Thus, women can do things in their groups that they would not do as individuals. The female FGD participants at Tono noted that: *'... being in this group has given us women a lot of power like if we need anything we now have the capability to go and meet the assemblyperson on our own. We can also go and meet the chief directly on our own without going through any other persons. We can just go by ourselves.'*

Power had to be exercised always for the collective good for the expression of women's empowerment to be accepted. Women in the FGD, at Tunti described women's empowerment as *'The voice and the capacity to do things on her own for herself and others.* Explaining further that, it is only when *'the woman ... use her power to take care of the family'* that *'everybody will give her that respect; and they should help the community too.'* Voice was highlighted as a key element in the expression of empowerment for group benefit. The expression of voice must be knowledgeable ideas backed by accurate facts about the situation under discussion, and one's rights and opportunities. Empowerment was inner strength and was connected to the ability to handle challenging conditions at home and within the community. Ultimately, then an empowered woman must be of benefit to her community:

... she should be able to handle the decisions of the community because she also lives in the community so whatever decision that community is going to take, she should have a voice in that. She should be able to express herself whether at the home or at the community level. If there is a meeting she should be able to say whatever she wants to say without any problem. So, this is how we look at ... empowerment; you are independent, you have your business that is giving you some income, you can add your voice to ... community ... decision-making.
(Male, KPI, Tamale).

Women's empowerment had the support of the community due to an increased recognition of its positive impact on family and community welfare. *'[W]hen you see a school child, it is the mother that is paying the fees, these days men don't pay school fees.'* (Female FGD, Libga). Beyond the socio-economic benefits of picking up school fees and hospital bills, others mentioned the respect such women commanded and the important part they played in community and household cohesion. So, such women were effective in conflict resolution and served as role models for other women as well. Female FGD in Kongwania stated that *'when you come to my house and you see that this is what I have done as a wife and you go home and say to yourself, "let me also do same and see if my husband will be happy with me" so it helps in one way or the other'.*

4.5 Women exercising power

Power was noted by research participants to have different forms depending on its source and who exercises it. Thus, *power over* others can be derived from law or a leadership position or just male physical strength. Women's FGD in Kongwanian explained, *'Government has power. I also have mine in the house. You have power to control. Men too have that power.'* Others recognised *power over* adding that power is the ability to control others. *'...saying this person should sit down, this person should go; so, you can control things, that is power.'* (FGD, Male, Libga).

There was a recognition among research participants that women were increasingly gaining power in recent times. The changing trend was attributed to interventions around livelihood activities that had given women access to independent income. Evidence cited to support women's increased empowerment was the fact that women no longer give their earnings to their husbands for safe keeping. The introduction of the village savings and loans schemes had offered women a secure place to keep their incomes outside the formal banking system and avoid the need to submit their money to the control of their husbands.

The empowering effects of interventions included the educational activities that were leading to enhanced assertiveness amongst women. *'Like those days they used not to have a say when it comes to taking decisions at the household level but because of the education and building their capacities, they have that power too'* (FGD, Female, Tunti). Research participants pointed, in addition, to intervention requirements that obliged women to form groups, attend meetings and take up group activities as additional empowering sources. In fact, some interventions insist that women should be part of all group decision making. These, they explained, had helped women to build inner confidence and facilitated their ability to exercise self-recognition. *'For us it's at two levels, the first level is the individual in the group, when they enter first they look shy, they can't talk. So, it starts from there and you see that whatever skill or knowledge they had in them and they are hiding. But they are now able to contribute to discussions at the meetings and then as a group.'* (KPI, Navrongo). Male FGD participants at Libga observed that: *'... in the past if a woman has ten goats she would rather say they are for her husband.'*

Evidence of women's empowerment transcended their individual capacities into increased group action. As one GAWU RIRO explained; *'The training has given them skills to be able to approach officials ... not only with the assembly, the banks and MoFA and others, so that they are now able to do things on their own. Sometimes it is very interesting, some of the officials will meet me and say that, these your people have come to me with a request.'* Such statements pointed to some growing enhanced self-capacity amongst women that was leading to increased assertiveness. Such women were showing signs of empowerment and using this to connect with others. An indication that women's acquisition of *power within* from interventions was being translated into *power with* for the good of the community and their households.

Research participants recognised the power imbalance between women and men even while acknowledging that some women were empowered. Empowered women could express their opinion to their husbands if they felt their husbands were going beyond bounds. Women in their disempowered status in relation to men, had some avenues to exercise *power over* men and even get them to reverse decisions taken in male spheres of influence. Lamenting cultural restrictions on women's decision-making powers, a KPI in Tamale noted that women could still get men to change decisions they considered detrimental to their household or community interests. He stated: *'Men will go and make decisions, they will come back home, and their wives will ask them about the outcome of their activities. If the women are not happy with the outcome they will tell their men that if they don't go and change the decision they both will not live in the house. The next day, the men will go and change the decision.'* Other evidence of women's ability to exercise *power over* were reported instances of some insisting on monogamous relations, refusing to allow their husbands to take on additional wives.

Despite these signs of power, overall the balance was tilted in men's favour. Thus, wealth deprived of respect for husbands was not empowerment. Females at Libga FGD noted *'... power is to respect your husband because he brought you to his house and he is supposed to control you.'* There were reports of male objection to their wives' participation in agricultural interventions. Women, according to research participants, were hiding their group affiliation and income earning activities for fear that husbands might lay claim to the income or withdraw their contribution to household upkeep, leaving women to carry a heavier sustenance burden for their households. Besides the need for *power* to be directed for the good of the community, it is this exercise of individual power for group benefit that empowered women and men were differentiated. Some respondents explained that empowered women developed their communities, while empowered men directed their actions only to their immediate families.

4.6 Men and women's empowerment

One of the questions pursued in this study was evidence of men breaking existing gender norms and taking up traditional female gender roles, like bathing children, cleaning the house and cooking. Research participants explained that men were beginning to appreciate the reduced burden of household provisioning as women's earnings increased. Some were actively supporting women's income earning activities with others even pooling income with their wives. At Korania for example male FGD participants noted how increasingly they were ready to transport their wives and the wares they traded to the market on their motor bikes, bathe their children and cook for the entire household. Some reported serving their wives dinner when they returned home late especially on market days. Men in the FGD at Doba, explained that *'... we know why they are late, we know it is in the interest of the family'*.

Another area of change was a reduction in men's resistance to women's participation in agricultural interventions. Though men were initially in opposition to their women's participation in the interventions when first introduced, the women succeeded in bringing them round. Women used their negotiating skills to break initial male resistance and the men had not regretted this. One GAWU RIRO reported men are now showing appreciation for the training the wives had obtained from joining the groups, *... my wife, ... can talk and express herself now. At first, it was always a problem; even discussing issues with her was a problem. But since she joined your group and joined her colleague women and men, after some time, she begins to share ideas with me ...'*. Some men were reported as a result to be showing respect for their wives' opinions with some actively courting their women's views on matters of importance to family welfare.

There was the question of men and their reaction to women who were identified as empowered, particularly women who earned more than their male partners. Men were reported to be more accepting of their wives earning their own income. As one key person observed, men *'... are also beginning to change, ... at first, they thought the woman's place was the kitchen, the house ..., but now they have seen the enormous contribution women are making to their lives and to the lives of their children.'* A GAWU RIRO had also observed that *'... things have changed, the men now allow them some level of independence. But a few years ago, no, the woman could not buy a goat or chicken and say that this is my goat ... or this is my fowl ...'* Libga men's FGD also had the same observation. They asserted that *'[y]es, now the change that has come is that in the last ten years, women never farmed more than one-acre of land but now they do.'* Men were reported as being careful not to attract their wives' displeasure, fully aware that the household is likely 'to crash' under their wives' discontentment. This is a sign of the recognition of some level of power women are beginning to acquire in their homes.

Research participants, both female and male, made it clear that men's acceptance of women's empowered status was conditioned on what was perceived as acceptable behaviour on the part of women. The women had to be 'good' and help to do *'... good things in the family'*. These good things included spending their income on the household, their children and that of co-wives, extended family members as well as giving their husbands financial support. Male participation in domestic work was also conditional, even though the outcome was recognised as enhancing family welfare. Men at FGD at Doba elaborated: *'It all boils down to trust, you know why your wife is unable to perform the household chores, so you step in to cook and feed the children. It is all for the benefit of the household.'*

5 Conclusions

Our exploration of women's spheres of influence revealed autonomy in all activities related to the performance of their domestic roles, where they had almost complete independence to act without submitting to any form of '*power over*'. In instances where they veered off from their traditional zones of influence, their actions were tolerated once they were directed at the welfare of the household. Findings revealed an emerging self-awareness, *power within*, on the part of women with group action, *power with*, to better their living conditions in the study communities covered. Restrictions on their spheres of influence were related to doubts about their ability to independently manage investments in and outside agriculture. Gender and age conferred *power over* for men and age only for women.

Income earning activities tied to group formation were facilitating the expansion of women's spheres of influence, first by building self-confidence, *power within*, and enabling the exercise of *power with* through group action to address shared needs. The occasions to translate *power with* into *power to*, were limited by norms celebrating women's expressions of *power within* and with only for household and community welfare in ways that did not upset existing gender orders. We note expressions like the need for empowered women to show respect for their husbands, for example, which undermines the conception of empowerment as it shows in our findings

In outlining their conception of empowerment, respondents recognised all the important ingredients we outlined earlier. Thus, *power within* was recognised as the foundation, inner capacity, voice and making informed decisions. As inner capacity strengthened together with growing voice to demand change, women transcended individual actions to increased group demands (*power with*) to achieve common goals. The limits however, were that such inner self-confidence and ability to change life chances should be restricted to family welfare and respect for men and older women. Female empowerment was accepted in so far as it supported the male provisioning role. Income earning and the ability to save were important factors identified as directing women's empowerment.

Interventions were providing the basis for women's expressions of empowerment, but notions of empowerment were limiting the rate of expansion of empowerment beyond *power with*. Though signs of the extension of *power with* and within into spheres beyond the domestic were few, the fact that they were beginning to show, and men were reported to be submitting to women's expanded spheres of influence showed that with time women can expand the *power within* and with into *power to*, to enhance their levels of empowerment. We note that, despite evidence of levels of empowerment attained in the study communities, women's conception stopped short of levels of self-efficacy that will allow women, whether as individuals or as a group to gain control over their lives and important agricultural resources like land: a shortcoming the women realised. For the moment, gaining control over their incomes was something they cherished as it allowed them the to expand opportunities for their children and other household members. The challenge is to discover the point where social norms allow this, and how interventions can respond to hasten the process and change existing notions of women and men to support this change. It is in the exercise of *power to* transform unequal gender relations that women's true empowerment is located.

The way research participants viewed the final outcome of women's empowerment limits the use of *power within* and *power with* to transform unequal gender relations. The instances for challenging oppressive structures that endorse male privilege, a situation that, Vijayamohanan and Asalatha (2012) insist, is the basis for true empowerment, is missing in the expressions underlying notions of empowerment for women and men in the study communities. We recognise the need to extend the study to investigate differences amongst women and how other forms of social hierarchy differentiate notions of empowerment, and possibly account for expansions in spheres of influence. This is important to assess the potential of the expressions of power evidenced in the study to form the basis of any kind of future mass actions for social change and to avoid the warning sounded by Batliwala (1994, p. 132) that, social change will not be 'sustainable if limited to a few individual women, because traditional power structures will seek to isolate and ostracise them.'

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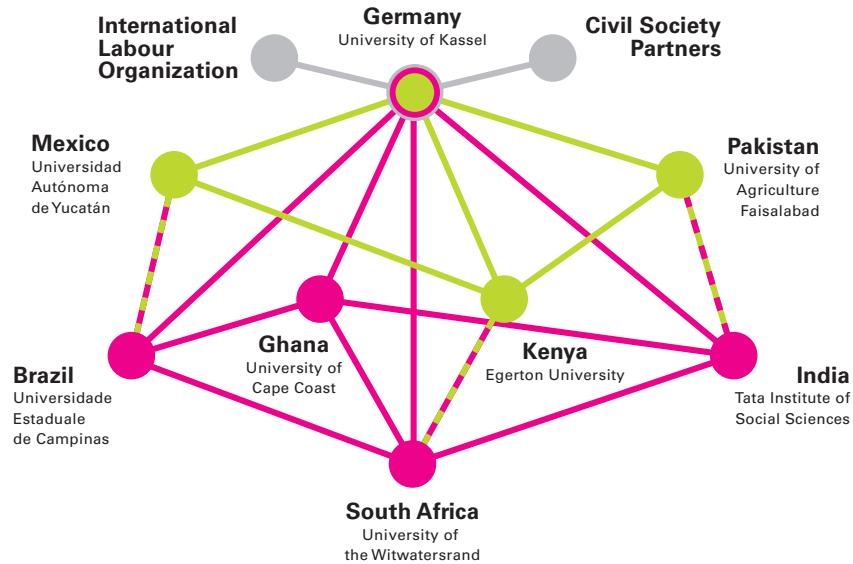
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**International Center for
Development and Decent Work**
University of Kassel, Germany
Phone: + 49 (0) 561 804-7399
E-Mail: felmeden@icdd.uni-kassel.de

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