



# Women's rank modifies the relationship between household and women's food insecurity in complex households in northern Burkina Faso

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between food insecurity at household and woman–children sub-unit levels and factors modifying this relationship in complex households in northern Burkina Faso. Data were collected from 126 households and 176 woman–children sub-units every 6 months from July 2001 to July 2003. Household food insecurity varied more between seasons than did woman–children sub-unit food insecurity. Woman–children sub-unit food insecurity increased when household food insecurity increased. Woman–children sub-units in monogamous households were less food insecure – and more at risk of becoming food insecure when the household became food insecure – than sub-units headed by women with first or second rank in polygamous households. Within polygamous households, woman–children sub-units headed by women with rank third or more were more likely to become food insecure when the household became food insecure than those with first or second rank. These results have implications for design, planning, and evaluation of programs and projects aiming to alleviate food insecurity in this and similar settings.

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## Introduction

Food insecurity – defined here as inadequate availability, insufficient access to food in socially acceptable ways, and incomplete utilization of food – is a challenge to human rights and a major threat to the health and nutritional status of vulnerable populations, especially women and children. Understanding the dynamics of food insecurity is critical for appropriate programme planning, targeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Development work related to economics, agriculture, and food security has focused on the household as an appropriate unit for designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions. This focus on the household has been partially driven by a progressive paradigm shift from macro- to micro-level focus of development theories. This shift has been described through a post-modern perspective of food security (Maxwell, 1996). The focus on the household also has been based on the assumption that the household is a homogenous unit whose members share the same access to household's goods including income, food, and other household resources.

This conception of the household as homogenous has been questioned by many researchers in both theoretical and empirical

work in economics, agriculture, and food security. Carr (2005), in a study of the household dynamics in Ghana, concluded that if the household is to be used as a unit to understand and address issues faced by the world's poor, development must cultivate sensitivity to context. That is, it must consider the current context in which the household is being defined and studied. Valdivia and Gilles (2001) recognized the existence of dynamics within the household, and the fact that such dynamics can impact the household access to well-being. The authors show that access to well-being depends on the household negotiation capacity, and that this negotiation capacity is gendered. They emphasize the central role that women play in the well-being of their environment (including the household) especially when their voices are heard.

The concept of intra-household dynamics and bargaining capacity (that is related to intra-household inequality) is supported by empirical economic work. In contrast to the altruistic family joint utility function proposed by Becker (1976), Folbre (1984), using data from the Philippines, proposed a model in which (1) altruism coexists with conflict of interest; (2) individual bargaining power determines share of the household of family income; (3) bargaining power differs among men, women, and children; and (4) these conditions are dynamic. Subsequent empirical literature has shown that scarcity in food resources sometimes results in households preferentially allocating food to certain members according to age, gender, health, or labor productivity, and that those preferred for allocation differ across contexts (Kuku et al., 2011). Haddad

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and Kanbur (1990) showed that failure to consider intra-household inequality leads to significant errors in the estimate of poverty.

The magnitude of intra-household inequality is more important in places such as sub-Saharan Africa where, because of the valued large and extended family, lineages, and the predominance of polygamy, women, especially those in rural areas, face social pressure and constraints that limit their access to household and community resources. The importance of intra-household inequality in this setting is mostly reported in agricultural work. Several studies showed inefficiencies in allocation of agricultural inputs and other production factors between plots owned by women and those owned by men (Carney and Watts, 1990; Jones, 1986). Udry (1996) reported up to 6% loss in production in Burkina Faso due to inefficient allocation of production factors. In such a context, the bargaining power of women becomes even more relevant. Kevane and Gray (1999) in their work entitled “Women’s field is made at night: Gendered land rights and norms in Burkina Faso” showed that the temporary land-use rights of women in Burkina are accompanied by other rights or duties: the right to a share of the harvest of the husband’s field, and the obligation to spend the woman’s harvest on specified goods.

Intra-household inequalities are concerning because of the potential negative impact on agricultural and economic indicators as shown above, but also on education, health, food security, and nutrition outcomes especially for women and children. Several authors have reported these negative effects, and have shown that these effects are exacerbated in contexts where the households have complex structure with existence of polygamy. In areas with high prevalence of polygamy, gender inequality with regard to decision-making within the household is more pronounced than in areas with low prevalence of polygamy (Agadjanian and Ezech, 2000). A study conducted in Bedouin-Arab communities in Israel showed that children from polygamous families have lower scholastic achievement than their counterparts from monogamous families (Al-Krenawi and Lighthman, 2000). Other authors found an association between marital status and adult learning achievement in the same population (Elbedour et al., 2000). A study of the Dogon in Mali suggested that the child mortality rate may be 7–11 times higher in polygamous families than in monogamous ones (Straussman, 1997).

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain the adverse effects of polygamy on social and health outcomes. Among these, a commonly cited one is the dilution of resources due to the larger size of polygamous households (Downey, 1995). In Tanzania, Sellen reported differential child growth according to the position of women in the polygamous households (Sellen, 1999). Children of first and second wives in polygamous marriages grew relatively poorly compared to children of third wives, and the association was not modified by household wealth.

With regards to food security, Kuku et al. (2011) found that children in Zimbabwe, and particularly younger children, reported food insecurity less often than did adults in the same household, although the opposite was found in better-off households. Gladwin et al. (2000) pointed out the importance and dynamic nature of gender role in household, and showed how this dynamic role can impact on women’s food security. The authors were looking at food security as an issue of income rather than just production, and showed a difference in the food-security situation between women in male- and female-headed households. They concluded that younger women should not be treated like older women because of their different production assets and bargaining power. Hadley et al. (2008) reported gender differences in the relationship between household food insecurity and adolescent food insecurity in Ethiopia. These studies suggest that we should expect inequality in food insecurity within polygamous households, particularly between men and women and among women of different rank within the household, but this has not been explicitly studied.

This study aimed to examine these aspects by following households over time using data from northern Burkina Faso, a context of subsistence farming with marked seasonality and chronic food insecurity. The study specifically investigated four research questions. First, how does the food insecurity of the woman–children sub-units change over time and how does it compare to changes in food insecurity at the household level? Second, what are the components of the variation of the food insecurity of the woman–children sub-units? Third, what is the relationship between food insecurity at the household level and that at the woman–children sub-unit level? Fourth, what demographic characteristics modify this relationship?

## Material and methods

### Study context

The study was conducted in the Zondoma province in northern Burkina Faso. The province had five departments, 104 villages and 134,881 inhabitants when the data were collected. Most people are subsistence farmers involved in the production of staple foods and cash crops during a short rainy season that lasts from July to October. Due to insufficient rainfall (average rainfall is between 500 and 700 mm per year), infertile soils, and frequent invasions by crop predators such as locust and caterpillars, the province is consistently faced with chronic food insecurity. Other reasons for chronic food insecurity include the lack of alternate income-generating activities during the dry season, cultural practices, and traditional norms that put vulnerable groups such as women and children at greater risk of inadequate food intake.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, northern Burkina Faso is the land of the Mossi ethnic group, a male-dominated society with large and extended family and the predominance of polygamy. Extended family and kinship are largely valued. (Skinner, 1964; McMillan, 1995). Decision-making power varies with rank, which, in turn, is a function of age, gender, and lineage (Fiske, 1991). Cultural norms establish clear demarcations of the role of women and men in all sectors including food production and decision about food utilization. With regards to food production, in addition to each household common plot, women have their own plots where they produce food and cash crop on which they rely to feed their children during part of the years.

Men are responsible for providing the staple foods such as sorghum millet and maize. Therefore, their resources are mostly directed to the production of these crops and, in some cases, to the production of cash crops such as peanuts, sesame, and beans. Women are responsible for providing the condiments for sauces. In addition to cereals, they produce vegetables such as okra and sorrel. Most women also produce small amounts of cash crops (i.e., bean, peanuts and earth peas).

Each household has a common plot that is usually designated as the plot of the head of the household and where all household’s members are required to work. Beside the common plot, women have their own plots for producing cereals (sorghum and millet but not maize) and often several other small plots where they produce cash crops and vegetables. The harvest from the common field is stored separately from women’s individual harvests. Ideally, this common store is to be used to feed the household’s members all the time. In many cases, however, there are periods of the year when the head of the household decides to stop providing food from the common store. During these periods, each woman has to rely on her own stores to feed herself and her children.

In northern Burkina Faso, households typically are combined as a complex production unit. A complex production unit is a group of households from the same extended family who work on a

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