



Agricultural diversification and dietary diversity: A feminist political ecology of the everyday experiences of landless and smallholder households in northern Ghana



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ABSTRACT

There is an emerging literature suggesting that when smallholder households diversify their agriculture, a wide range of food groups will be available, and consequently, dietary diversity will be improved. The present article brings this literature into critical conversation with research in feminist political ecology. Grounded in five years of repeated fieldwork, the article weaves together 70 in-depth interviews, and dietary as well as farm production diversity data from 30 households in northern Ghana. This dataset is analyzed by considering not only the diversity of farming systems, but also household headship, including male-headed, *de facto* female-headed, and *de jure* female-headed. Among other findings, the paper suggests that dietary diversity scores are lowest for households who have lost their farmlands to on-going land grabbing in Ghana. Furthermore, the paper suggests that while agricultural diversification is essential, it is not sufficient in itself to address nutritional challenges confronting smallholder households. In the contested and political arena of the household, the gendered politics of access to food can deeply shape how agricultural diversification contributes to dietary diversity. Overall, I do not wish to conclude that there are no benefits of increasing the diversity of farm production. Rather, I wish to stress that farm production diversity might not be the best or only strategy to improving dietary diversity among rural households. Through this case study, I also contribute to emerging research in new feminist political ecologies by demonstrating how the intersection of gender, seniority, marital status, and sexual politics shapes resource access and control.

1. Introduction

Today's agriculture and food systems are extraordinarily productive. Enough food is produced currently to meet the needs of every man, woman, and child twice over (Akram-Lodhi, 2013; Pritchard et al., 2016). Yet, according to global estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization, almost 795 million people, or one out of every nine people on this planet, live in near-constant hunger (FAO, 2015). Next to these hungry people, an estimated 2 billion people suffer from deficiencies in particular micronutrients, including iron, zinc and vitamin A (FAO, 2013; Von Grebmer et al., 2014). Worldwide, sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the greatest magnitude of chronic hunger and micronutrient deficiencies (FAO, 2015; Von Grebmer et al., 2014). Available statistics show that one in every four people is malnourished in sub-Saharan Africa, and the burden of malnourishment is concentrated disproportionately among poor farming households (FAO, 2015). These problems have been linked to reduced crop diversity, or

the increasingly homogeneity in food supplies, with diets now dominated overwhelmingly by cereals such as corn, wheat, and rice (Khoury et al., 2014; Pritchard et al., 2016). Consequently, there are debates about how best to leverage agriculture for improved food and nutrition security, particularly using farm production diversity (Demeke et al., 2017; Fanzo et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015; Sibhatu et al., 2015).

There are multiple pathways through which agriculture affects nutritional outcomes (Hoddinott, 2012; World Bank, 2007). An extensive literature demonstrates that for households producing for their own consumption, dietary diversity¹, in part, depends on farm production diversity,² including the number of crops that are grown and species diversity (e.g., Demeke et al., 2017; Fanzo et al., 2013; Herforth, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Malapit et al., 2015). For example, in Malawi, farm production diversity has been positively associated with dietary diversity, with a significantly stronger association in the case of female-headed households (Jones et al., 2014). Sibhatu et al. (2015) also

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¹ Dietary diversity is defined as the number of unique food groups in a given diet over a given reference period, typically 24 h or 7 days (Kennedy et al., 2011).

² Farm production diversity is defined more broadly here to include the diversity of crop and livestock species produced on a farm (Jones et al., 2014; Sibhatu et al., 2015).

indicate that on-farm production diversity is positively associated with dietary diversity in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Malawi. Similar findings have been reported from Zambia (Kumar et al., 2015), and in Tanzania (Herforth, 2010). Nonetheless, there have been counter results from other settings. For example, Torheim et al. (2004) indicate that there is no association between crop diversity and nutrition outcomes. Research by Remans et al. (2011) suggests a strong association between crop diversity and dietary quality at the village, but not at the household level. Moreover, in linking agricultural production to improved diets, impact pathways are not always through direct consumption, but also indirectly through access to local markets (Hoddinott, 2012; Remans et al., 2011; Sibhatu et al., 2015). For instance, households with relatively good access to markets tend to consume more diverse diets, with their food consumption reliant less on own-account farming (Koppmair et al., 2017). Still, this association has also not been observed in all contexts (e.g., see Lockett et al., 2015). Thus, there is a mixed evidence base for how farm production diversity contributes to dietary diversity, and several research gaps remain (Powell et al., 2015). Two of these research gaps are noteworthy.

Firstly, little is known about whether and how the amount of land available for raising crops and pasturing animals affects production diversity and dietary diversity. Previous studies have found that access to more land may allow farmers to diversify their production significantly (Makate et al., 2016). However, among smallholder farmers in Africa, inequitable access to land has existed for centuries, with land struggles, enclosure and dispossession currently on the rise (Cotula, 2013; Hall, 2011; Peters, 2013). Thus, there is a crucial need to explore whether and how access to land shapes farm production diversity and dietary diversity.

Secondly, the growing body of work on farm production diversity and dietary diversity reveals very little about the role of intra-household gender politics (Malapit et al., 2015). Although few studies acknowledge the importance of gender (e.g., Demeke et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Koppmair et al., 2017; Sibhatu et al., 2015), they do so merely to note the mediating effects of gender of the household head. In these accounts, gender is conceived as characteristics of individuals rather than as *social relations*, thereby contributing to explanations that fail to specify whether and how gendered relations shape farm production diversity and dietary diversity. With few notable exceptions (e.g., Malapit et al., 2015), most studies do not go beyond a comparison of male- versus female-headed households, especially distinguishing between *de jure* and *de facto* female headship, with the latter defined as households where the principal male is temporarily absent. Given the complex nature of household formation, organization, and struggles within African contexts (Bassett, 2002; Schroeder, 1999), there is a pressing need to examine the diverse positions not only of women and men within a household, but also generational groups, and how these positions affect farm production and dietary diversity. Aside from inattentiveness to gender politics, many of the existing studies argue that by increasing the number of crop and livestock species produced on a farm, dietary quality would be improved (e.g., Demeke et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014). In other words, more diverse food and animal production would result in more diverse diets. This association, even if empirically proven, is rather problematic. Indeed, to characterize poor dietary diversity as just the result of a lack of diversified farming systems not only oversimplifies the problem, but ignores crucial socio-political questions concerning access to and control over food resources. Within the domestic sphere, aggregate availability of different types of foods may not necessarily guarantee access (e.g., see Burchi and De Muro, 2016).

Given this backdrop, the main purpose of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of whether and how landholding, intra-household gender politics and patterns of food allocation shape farm production and dietary diversity. I draw the empirical evidence from fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2016 in northwestern Ghana, a region where resource access and control is largely determined by elderly

men (Atuoye and Odame, 2013; Ganle et al., 2016). Indeed, northwestern Ghana provides a fascinating case study because while production diversity is quite high, there are persistent and high levels of chronic malnutrition, relative to other parts of the country (Glover-Amengor et al., 2016). Fieldwork with farmers and other stakeholders provided a unique opportunity to explore the question: *what is the role of land access and intra-household gender relations in improving farm production and dietary diversity?* To answer this question, I draw theoretical insights from feminist political ecology (Bezner Kerr, 2014; Elmhirst, 2011a; Rocheleau et al., 1996) to elucidate the hidden socio-political processes shaping how farm production diversity contributes to dietary diversity at the household level.

2. Theoretical framework

Geographers have had a long-standing engagement with trying to understand the multiscalar, political-economic, and ecological processes that shape vulnerability to food insecurity, hunger, famine, and malnutrition (e.g., Jarosz, 2009; Watts, 2013). A key approach in this regard is political ecology – broadly understood as a field analyzing the simultaneously political, economic, and ecological processes underpinning human access to and use of natural resources, with implications for sustainable livelihoods (Perreault et al., 2015). Among other concerns, political ecology insists that any explanation of food and hunger-related problems must seriously confront questions linked to historical political economy, especially colonial policies, market crises, state and corporate food control (e.g., see Watts, 2013). Much of the work rooted in this approach has critically shaped how human-environment problems are understood, solutions conceptualized, and which ideas are given credence.

In this paper, I draw specifically upon a sub-field of political ecology, namely feminist political ecology (hereafter FPE), to frame my analysis (Bassett, 2002; Bezner Kerr, 2014; Elmhirst, 2011a; Rocheleau et al., 1996). FPE “draws on the field of political ecology to focus on resource access and control, gendered constructions of knowledge, and the embeddedness of local gendered environmental struggles in regional and global political economic contexts” (Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2008, p. 7). Work carried out under the banner of FPE ranges widely in terms of epistemology and methodology, but almost all start from a curiosity about the gendered material conditions of lives rooted in specific geographical settings (e.g., Bezner Kerr, 2014; Elmhirst, 2011b; Gururani, 2002; Hovorka, 2006; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011). To varying degrees, these studies conceive “gender as relational: involving the interaction of men and women, structured through norms and institutions, reconfigured through individual agency” (Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2008, p. 8). For the purposes of this article, three core concerns within FPE are relevant.

The first is a focus on the scale of the household, especially the gender politics of access to and control over resources. Household-based analysis has been an important analytical thread within most contributions to FPE, especially work focused on resources that are key to livelihoods (Bassett, 2002; Bezner Kerr, 2014; Wangui, 2014). Men and women hold differing resource rights through their distinctive roles within the household, as well as based upon family authority structures. Consequently, I seek to examine how these differing rights shape access to food within the domestic sphere. Here, I draw specifically from FPE research that has focused on cultural norms regarding gender roles, and *de jure* and *de facto* claims to household resources in African contexts (Bassett, 2002; Schroeder, 1999). To varying degrees, these studies draw upon feminist post-structural perspectives to argue that the household is best conceptualized as a more complex and contested site, rather than cooperative units of production and consumption (Bezner Kerr, 2014; Schroeder, 1999). This conception of the household is much more nuanced than traditional unitary models, which assume the household to be an unproblematic site, and where resources are assumed to be in a single conjugal fund.

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