



# WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN COCOA COMMUNITIES IN GHANA

## GENDER ASSESSMENT BRIEF

Due to its commercial value, cocoa is considered a man's crop and gender inequality is pervasive in the cocoa sector. Indeed, although women are involved in nearly all activities of cocoa production in Ghana, their role and contributions remain unseen, undervalued, and often unpaid. This is caused by a combination of unequal access to productive resources, unbalanced power relationships, and harmful gender norms. Land ownership is a key factor. Because women typically do not own or lease land on their own, they are often not perceived as farmers by themselves or others and have low representation in cocoa producer groups, which are an important vehicle for receiving inputs, extension services, financial services, and technology. However it was found that when women are allocated a parcel of land to control and manage, they recognize themselves as farmers, as do others. Women also have little to no involvement in the sale of cocoa and limited decision-making power over use of income from cocoa production. Evidence from other women's empowerment initiatives has shown that empowering women in the cocoa value chain leads to increased productivity and benefits to their households.

To address these barriers, USAID is working with Ecom Agroindustrial Corp. (ECOM), a global commodity trading and processing company specialized in coffee, cocoa, and cotton, as well as brands who buy cocoa from ECOM such as Hershey, to strengthen women's land rights and economically empower women in the cocoa value chain in Ghana. Implemented by the Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) program, the two-year activity will engage both the sustainability and commercial branches of ECOM to integrate gender equality into its standard business operations and core training programs offered to farmers. This will provide ECOM with the knowledge, resources, and best practices to work with community members to empower women in Ghana and potentially more broadly in West

Africa. This work could ultimately scale benefits to nearly 1 million farmers: 120,000 cocoa farmers ECOM engages with in Ghana and over 800,000 in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria.

An initial gender assessment was carried out between November 2020 and March 2021 to provide a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities for gender equality, social inclusion, and women's economic empowerment in the cocoa value chain in Ghana, particularly focused on ECOM's current practices and capacity regarding gender equality and women's empowerment, women's access to productive resources in target cocoa communities, and crop diversification opportunities for women. The gender assessment included a review of existing primary and secondary data, interviews with 40 ECOM staff and local stakeholders, and focus group discussions with 122 women and men farmers in Assin Fosu and Antoakrom Districts.

This brief shares a summary of the findings and recommendations according to five domains: 1) laws, policies, regulations, and institutional practices; 2) social norms and beliefs; 3) gender roles, responsibilities, and time use; 4) access to and control over assets and resources; and 5) patterns of power and decision-making. Detailed findings and recommendations are available in the full gender assessment report.

## **LAWS, POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES**

The assessment found that ECOM has promoted gender equality within the company and in its work with cocoa farmers in Ghana, although clear policies, strategies, and expertise to guide such efforts remain a critical gap. The company is finalizing a framework of sustainability commitments that include gender equality, providing great momentum for the proposed activity. Although ECOM staff interviewed claimed that the company actively attempts to recruit more women and there are women occupying strategic positions, women's representation in field positions remains very low.

ECOM signs contracts with individual farmers based on their status as land owners, which means most contracts are signed with men. Despite the company's attempts to provide men and women equal opportunity and access to resources, in practice women have less direct access to inputs and lower participation in training. This reveals that although well-intentioned, "gender neutral" approaches can fail to acknowledge certain practical and social barriers faced by women in the sector.

## **SOCIAL NORMS AND BELIEFS**

Identification as a cocoa farmer is closely related to land ownership and not only to working in cocoa production. As men typically own land or *abunu* rights,<sup>1</sup> women often do not perceive themselves or are recognized by others as cocoa farmers. However, according to the majority of male and female participants consulted, once a woman has a cocoa farm of her own, irrespective of how she acquired it, she recognizes herself as a cocoa farmer and is recognized by her husband and the community as a cocoa farmer. This suggests there is scope to encourage community members to provide parcels of land to women so that they are recognized as genuine cocoa farmers. Men are considered heads of households, and as such they typically engage directly with buying agents and determine how income from the sale of cocoa is to be used. This happens even when land is acquired or inherited by women, as it is seen as a way for women to show respect and deference to men. The belief that women cannot read scales and cannot negotiate further reinforces the dominant role men play in the sale of cocoa.

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<sup>1</sup> *Abunu* is a type of land tenure arrangement where a landowner offers a parcel of usually unfarmed land for someone to clear and plant cocoa trees. After the trees have been established, the land is divided and customary land ownership is secured for the person who contributed the labor.

Social norms establish that it is a sign of respect for women to have men leading the sale of cocoa and most women think it is not their place to sell cocoa beans.

Gender-based violence (GBV) can happen at any time; however, in scenarios where the distribution of power is disrupted – such as when a woman starts making more income, exercises greater decision-making power, or does not complete the unpaid labor activities typically expected of her – there is an increased risk of GBV. Acceptance of GBV, particularly intimate partner violence, was noted in the districts consulted. Men and women farmers agreed that a man has the right to punish his wife if she disrespects or disobeys him or displays “misbehaviors” such as

“If you run to your family head, he is a man and will accuse you of having done something to deserve the violence from your husband; the elderly women are even worse, all they will do is advise you to humble yourself, not to warrant such beatings the next time.”

- *Woman farmer in Nanhini*

having an extramarital affair, raising her voice at her husband in public, disobeying his orders, not seeking his permission for certain things, refusing to have sexual intercourse, or not cooking or cooking late. Punishment for these behaviors may include physical, verbal, emotional, and economic violence. While Ghana has legal provisions that criminalize GBV, there is limited knowledge of such legal provisions or where to access services. Intimate partner violence is not reported to police since men control the main source of livelihoods, leaving women with limited resources to leave abusive relationships.

## GENDER ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND TIME USE

Division of labor in the cocoa value chain is highly gendered. Most tasks are completed by both men and women, but socially defined gender roles reserve for men activities that are considered physically strenuous, require expert knowledge, and have a high decision-making value, such as land clearing, purchasing cocoa seeds/seedlings, pruning, spraying, fermenting, bagging, and selling to purchasing agents. Some tasks are seen as women’s jobs, such as weeding, gathering cocoa pods, and scooping beans from pods. Women are also mostly responsible for planting and harvesting food crops. Cassava and plantain are kept for household consumption and men usually sell maize and other cereals, keeping the proceeds to defray costs related to cocoa production.

“The majority of the women know how to do harvesting of cocoa but they are not willing to do because society looks it as a man’s role.”

- *Woman farmer in Akropong*

Due to cocoa seasonality, income scarcity and food insecurity are higher between May and July. January to March is the cocoa lean season, when men resort to burning trees for charcoal, the transport business, palm wine tapping, timber logging, and illegal mining (in some communities) to obtain income. Women use small trading (mostly from vegetable farming) and soap making throughout the year as a source of additional income – this gives women some additional decision-making power. Farmers who do mixed farming are able to get income from diverse sources to cater for their family in lean periods and are less likely to experience food insecurity.

Women are primarily responsible for unpaid household and caring tasks, including caring for children, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, fetching firewood, and shopping for household needs. Couples normally work together on the farm and at the end of the day men can rest or go out to socialize, whereas women are expected to tend to household responsibilities. As a consequence, women’s time poverty is high and they have less availability to work in cocoa farming (producing less cocoa as a result), attend training, and engage in income diversification activities. For women who head households alone, time pressures are even higher. Men and women farmers also remarked that a woman’s ability to achieve her aspirations in cocoa farming and beyond depends on whether her husband agrees to support her with household tasks. Flexibility in gender roles is influenced by community culture and the level of mutual understanding and cooperation between spouses.

## ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OVER ASSETS AND RESOURCES

Land ownership and *abunu* rights are male dominated. With lower access to land and other productive resources unlocked by land ownership, few women are doing well in small-scale cocoa farming and most women cannot go into large-scale cocoa farming. It is rare to have prominent women cocoa farmers. Men who own multiple parcels of land sometimes put one of them in the name of their wives. It is unusual for a farmer to give a portion of his *abunu* farm to his wife, and he would need to inform the landowner before taking this step.

Therefore, women normally rely on men to access land and other resources and their role in cocoa is seen as supportive only. Women can and do inherit land from their parents and can purchase land on their own, although few women have the resources to do so. Nonetheless, even when women own land, they still defer control and decision-making to their husbands as a sign of respect. Most women do not see the need for joint ownership of land, as that would give the impression of competing with their husbands.

“Until the name of a woman reflects in the farmers’ list, the community does not recognize her as a cocoa farmer.”

- *Male focus group respondent, Kwafu community*

In Akropong, the assessment revealed that the community is losing most of its cocoa land to illegal small-scale gold mining (locally known as *galamsey*). Cocoa farmers, especially women, are persuaded or forced to use their cocoa farm for *galamsey* when mining on neighboring farms encroaches into their plots. The chemicals used for mining contaminate the water supply and damage cocoa trees and other crops. The expansion of illegal mining is increasing the cost of living due to limited farmland available and the increase in the price of vegetables normally cultivated in cocoa farms through intercropping. This affects women disproportionately, especially those who head households on their own (single/widowed women) and rely on hired labor that is increasingly more expensive with the expansion of *galamsey*.

Land ownership is the pathway for accessing other productive resources; it is often a requirement for membership in cocoa cooperatives or producer groups, which are an important vehicle for receiving inputs and information on good agricultural practices, and accessing loans and credit. Access to cocoa seedlings is a common challenge to all farmers. Distribution of seedlings is determined by registration in cocoa cooperatives, where women are largely underrepresented. The high cost of seedlings is also a barrier to women because they have less disposable income.

Farm inputs like fertilizer, pest control chemicals, and agricultural equipment/tools are typically distributed (on credit) to cocoa farmers registered in cooperative groups and according to farm size. Most stakeholders agreed that even when women are not registered as landowners, if they work in cocoa farming, they would qualify for extension services. However, they are likely to have time constraints and competing household responsibilities that may prevent them from regularly attending training programs.

The primary means of accessing credit for women is through village savings and loan associations (VSLAs). Women are seen as more credit-worthy than men, as they have more regular income throughout the year through small trading and other activities beyond cocoa, whereas men have more seasonal income. While VSLAs are meant for both men and women, they are dominated by women. However, they do not have control or final say on how the funds are used and need to gain permission from their husbands to participate.

According to ECOM field monitoring data, 79 percent of farmers earn most of their income from cocoa. As cocoa is seasonal and considered a men’s crop, livelihood diversification can increase women’s economic independence, decision-making power, and benefit cocoa farming families more broadly, enabling them to have more secure income and food security during lean months. The assessment found

that women in cocoa communities are eager to engage in vertical and horizontal (i.e., within and outside of cocoa) income diversification opportunities. Income diversification has some challenges, though, including access to start-up capital, access to markets, and the risk of men taking profitable activities over.

## **PATTERNS OF POWER AND DECISION-MAKING**

As earlier noted, cocoa is considered a “men’s crop” in Ghana, leaving women with very little agency and decision-making power over cocoa production and related benefits. Men are socially accepted as heads of households and more knowledgeable about cocoa, resulting in greater decision-making power. Men have the discretion to make decisions without consulting women, but the reverse is not true for women, who need to consult their husbands in most decisions.

“The opinions of women are not considered about the purchase, use, and disposal of cocoa land.”

- *Woman farmer in Nanhini*

In the target communities, women tend to lack the confidence to participate in joint cooperatives. The Ghana Cocoa Board (Cocobod) is supporting women farmers to organize into women-only groups that are later graduated into cooperatives. There are three all-women cooperatives in the operational areas. Cooperative membership is not free, and the monetary commitment is frequently a constraint for women. Perceptions on whether women can decide to join a producer group or cooperative varied across communities, from full decision of men to women’s decision with their

husbands’ approval.

Men are perceived to be more experienced and skilled in negotiation and therefore dominate decision-making related to the sale of cocoa and use of income. Women claimed that sale of cocoa and financial matters are men’s business and not theirs. In a minority of households, women can give input and the sale of cocoa is viewed as a collective decision, although men still make the final call.

Women farmers consulted agreed that the areas where they would like to have more autonomy and decision-making power are matters related to the household, such as managing household chores and essential expenditures (particularly in critical times), as well as pursuing income generating activities to support the family.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Private sector actors have an influential role in the cocoa sector and are strategically positioned to lead efforts to empower women by adopting sourcing policies that recognize and respond to their needs and providing women with targeted training and access to resources. Empowering women can increase not only household income and responsible expenditure, but also cocoa productivity, profitability, compliance with sustainability goals, and positive brand image, so that inclusive business models make social and economic sense. Hence, a more productive and inclusive cocoa value chain benefits the communities involved in cocoa production, the commodity buying companies, and the chocolate brands they supply.

The gender assessment found that a partnership between ECOM, USAID, and Hershey could capitalize on the companies’ previous and emerging sustainability efforts. By bringing ECOM’s sustainability and commercial areas together and integrating gender-responsive strategies into standard operational and training practices, USAID will promote sustainability and scalability across Ghana and potentially other cocoa producing regions.

Based on the barriers identified and the findings detailed in the previous sections, a series of recommendations can inform the planned intervention regarding building gender equality and women’s

empowerment capacity among ECOM management and field staff; integrating gender equality and women's economic empowerment into ECOM's core business operations; and developing women's economic empowerment activities that increase access to resources and shift harmful gender norms. These recommendations include:

- Support ECOM to operationalize global-level sustainability commitments related to gender equality in Ghana by developing a country gender and social inclusion policy or strategy that articulates ECOM's approach to gender equality internally and its engagement with farmers;
- Explore strategies to encourage men to register women as joint farmers with ECOM and farmers' groups, and in the case of multiple farming plots, to name their wives as lead farmer for one of these plots;
- Adapt and integrate household norms change methodologies that have been implemented by ECOM and ILRG elsewhere into ECOM's Good Agricultural Practices training programs, promoting shifts in social and gender norms around land ownership and control, distribution of labor in the household, and gender-based violence;
- Provide financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and soft skills training to build women's confidence to take a greater role in cocoa farms, join producer groups, take on leadership positions, and pursue alternative income generating opportunities;
- Adopt measures to address women's practical and social limitations to access training and extension services and to join cocoa producer groups;
- Use ECOM's needs assessments to inform income diversification activities and build partnerships for input provision, extension, tools, technology, and linkage with markets; and
- Include GBV in norms change training and dialogues. Minimize risks of causing or exacerbating GBV in the design and implementation of activities.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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