



Discussion Paper BRIEFS

Food Consumption and Nutrition Division of the International Food Policy Research Institute

Discussion Paper 186

Are Wealth Transfers Biased Against Girls? Gender Differences in Land Inheritance and Schooling Investment in Ghana's Western Region

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This study explores evolutionary changes in education and land inheritance patterns over three successive generations of Akan and non-Akan people in Ghana's Western Region. The study responds to the growing concern about the erosion of women's land rights in customary land areas, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some studies have argued that increasing commercialization, population growth, increases in land value, and shifts in land tenure toward individualized rights have eroded women's land rights. The evidence offered for this argument is the gradual disappearance of matrilineal inheritance and its replacement with patrilineal inheritance systems. However, empirical evidence for arguments like this is generally scanty. Indeed, whether changes in land inheritance patterns favoring men necessarily lead to a deterioration in women's welfare cannot be ascertained without considering other important forms of intergenerational wealth transfers.

Land Inheritance Practices in Western Ghana

Akan households in Ghana's Western Region have traditionally practiced uterine inheritance: land is transferred from the deceased man to his uterine brother or nephew, a decision made by the extended family or matriclan. Children do not inherit land from their parents, but sons may inherit land from their matrilineal relatives. In contrast, among patrilineal groups that have migrated to the area, inheritance occurs strictly along paternal lines. Recently, however, Akan land is often transferred from husband to wife and children as inter-vivos gifts, provided the wife and children help the husband establish cocoa fields. This increase in the demand for women's labor seems to have created incentives for husbands to give their wives and children land.

Methodology and Data

Using a specially designed retrospective household survey of land inheritance, gifts, temporary allocation

of family land, and schooling over three generations, this paper explores the determinants of the bestowal of land and investment in schooling between sons and daughters during the shift from communal to individualized tenure institutions. The conceptual framework pays particular attention to different types of land transfers, since the strength of individual land rights is linked closely to the mode of land transfers. It also pays special attention to "social" discrimination (associated with traditional inheritance practices and land allocation rules among ethnic groups) and "parental" discrimination (expressed in differential treatment of daughters and sons associated with parental resource ownership).

The data were taken from a 1996–97 survey of households in 10 selected villages in the Wassa area of Ghana's Western Region. Two hundred and eighty-one households were chosen based on stratified random sampling of pure owners, pure tenants, pure caretakers (who manage mature cocoa fields, usually for absentee owners), owners cum tenants, owners cum caretakers, and tenants cum caretakers. For each sample household, we collected information on land tenure status and land use of all parcels and conducted a retrospective survey of inheritance and schooling. The survey included questions on parents, siblings, and children of the respondents, yielding information on three generations. Respondents were asked about premarriage wealth of their parents and in-laws, the

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schooling and inheritance of their spouses, and schooling and proposed bequests to their children. Each respondent also listed all of his or her siblings, their dates of birth, their educational attainment, and the areas of different types of land that they received or expected to receive from their parents or other relatives.

After extensive pretests, the inheritance retrospective was designed to capture the possibility of acquiring land from four sets of matrilineal relatives: the

mother, maternal uncle, maternal grandmother, and other matrilineal relatives. Only one source of paternal inheritance was identified: the father. Since not only siblings, but also cousins, nieces, and nephews can inherit land from the matriline, the number of heirs can potentially be very large. To simplify matters, the analysis is confined only to the siblings and half-siblings the respondent could name, and thus the study does not analyze the effects of population pressure.

Results and Discussion

We expected that investments in the education of sons and daughters would adjust to changes in land inheritance practices, insofar as land transfers and education are major alternative forms of intergenerational wealth transfers. Indeed, we find that while daughters do receive less land than sons, the bias against them in land transfers has weakened among Akans due to declining social discrimination. This has occurred partly because of the adoption of an agricultural technology—cocoa farming—that increased demand for female labor and hence of women's economic value and bargaining power. Individualization of tenure was, in part, a means of providing an incentive to invest in land, particularly by women. Another important finding is that although daughters continue to be disadvantaged in schooling attainment, there are signs that the gender gap is beginning to close.

It is often argued that women's land rights tend to decline as customary land tenure institutions evolve toward individualized ownership systems. While evolutionary changes toward individual ownership have been taking place, in Ghana's Western Region women's land rights have been strengthened rather than weakened. Gifts have recently emerged as an important way to transfer land from men to women,

thereby reducing the social discrimination against women in land transfers. It is important to recall that gifts are allowed by the extended family only if wives and children help the husband establish cocoa fields. Thus, the increasing transfer of land to wives and daughters is consistent with the increasing demand for female labor as land use intensifies. Such long-term changes have been supported by the absence of strong parental discrimination against daughters.

Gender differences in schooling have also been declining in Ghana's Western Region, primarily because of declining social discrimination. Although we have not analyzed the social and economic forces underlying such changes, we conjecture that building schools in remote villages and increasing nonfarm employment opportunities for women have increased parental investments in daughters' schooling. Moreover, as school enrollments approach universal, it is natural for the gender gap in schooling attainment to close. More rigorous analysis has to be performed, however, to achieve a deeper understanding of the declining gender gap in schooling in Ghana's Western Region.

Whether our results can be generalized is a major remaining empirical issue. First, this is a case in which an agricultural technology increased demand for female labor, and hence increased women's economic value and bargaining power. Individualization of tenure was in part a means of providing an incentive to invest in the land, particularly by women. In other cases where women's labor is less important for cash cropping, individualization might still decrease women's control over land.

Keywords: wealth transfers, gender, Ghana

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