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The impact of sustainable agricultural innovations on women’s agency and voice: A gendered perspective from northern Ghana

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Abstract

Across sub-Saharan Africa, sustainable agricultural practices (SAP), namely indigenous, adapted, or innovative, are widespread. They are being promoted to address the challenges of hunger and nutrition, while enabling the resilience of local farming systems to environmental degradation and climate change. Adapting these practices to the specific farming systems in which they are integrated is key to their long-term adoption and the equitable enjoyment of their benefits. For several years, particular attention has been paid to the social dimension of these farming systems, in addition to their biological and ecological conditions. Yet, although farmers’ identity, such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status, are increasingly considered in recognition of how these intersect with their innovation experience, some local power dynamics affecting SAP’s concrete impacts remain overlooked and neglected. In the patriarchal societies of northern Ghana, power and authority governing access to resources and means of production are deeply gendered, and the use of violence to maintain the status quo is rampant. Hence, the research, built on a feminist political ecology perspective and an intersectional approach, aims to critically analyse how adopting SAP influences gendered power dynamics and gender-based violence within smallholder families in northern Ghana. Findings, based on the analysis of 16 focus group discussions and 61 individual interviews, show that SAP can exacerbate power struggles within smallholder families due to increased competition for scarce resources, thereby intensifying gender-based violence against women. Research participants reported instances of physical, psychological, and socio-economic violence against women resulting from intensification strategies - focused on increasing agricultural outputs - and diversification strategies -introducing varied crops, practices, and income-generating activities- in sustainable agriculture. The research highlights the different coping mechanisms adopted by women, depending on their marital, familial, economic, and ethnic status, offering opportunities to promote truly equitable and inclusive sustainable agriculture. Based on the findings, the study suggests the need to consider the issue of gender-based violence against women when developing agricultural projects and policies to ensure fair and sustainable adoption of agricultural innovations.

Keywords: Gender, gender-based violence, innovation, sustainable agricultural practices