Effects of customary tenure and gender on access to forests and trees in the Sahelian forest-farm interface: A cross-country comparison from Ghana and Burkina Faso

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Previous research has illustrated the importance of forest and tree resources for the livelihoods and well-being of women living in the Sahel. In Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso, smallholders manage multi-use landscape mosaics where it is difficult to separate agricultural and forest land-uses, and where formal and customary tenure overlap to create complex gender differentiated systems shaping access to and benefits from forest and tree resources. However, policy and market shifts are bringing change to resource management systems in the region, and it is not clear how these changes are affecting resource access or management patterns, or, in particular, how these changes are effecting women and their livelihoods. This paper reports on results from a three-year comparative study in Ghana and Burkina Faso led by CIFOR in collaboration with ICRAF and Tree Aid that examined how smallholders manage the forest-farm interface under shifting and overlapping policy regimes. This analysis uses data gathered during a systematic household survey conducted with 473 farmers (237 women and 236 men) in seven Ghanaian and six Burkinabe villages from September through November 2018, and also draws on 58 focus group interviews, and observations made during participatory action research conducted earlier in these same villages. The survey focused on household characteristics, current use and access to land and tree resources, the nature of rights claims over resources, and perceived benefits from those resources. This research contributes to a fuller understanding of the Sahelian context by examining how gender influences forest access and management, how these patterns vary depending on socio-economic characteristics of households, and how policy and market conditions are changing women’s control over tree resources. As policy and development interventions attempt to address resource degradation, poverty, food insecurity and inequality in the region, having a better understanding of how these resource use systems function and vary locally will be an important starting point for avoiding unintended consequences that undercut the livelihoods of women that depend on forests and trees.