

Enhancing women's rights and lives through gender-equitable restoration in Burkina Faso

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“Access to and control over land are key to involving rural women in restoration.”

Introduction

Gender differences and gender inequalities in rights, status and responsibilities significantly shape daily rural life and life cycles in rural West Africa (Levasseur 2003), where women face significant constraints in participating in activities aimed at restoring forests and farmland. Yet, they also find innovative ways to overcome such constraints, such as collective action and the creation of groups of mutual support. In Burkina Faso, rural women are mobilizing such groups to improve their living conditions through sustainable resource management, and many NGOs, projects and associations are supporting them in these endeavours. By organizing themselves into collectives that can be targeted by development institutions, women improve their access to technical, financial and material support and training, build their capacities, and acquire new knowledge and resources to actively participate in land restoration.

In Burkina Faso and elsewhere in West Africa, women's limited access to and control over land severely hinders their ability to engage in restoration activities. Limited rights to land are a result not only of formal policies, but also of customary rules, which vary according to ethnicity, village, social status and the position of women in polygamous families (Konate 2006). Unequal ownership of assets such as equipment, fertilizers, tools and improved seeds — coupled with longstanding disparities between men and women in access to formal education, information, and agricultural extension — also has negative impacts on women farmers' ability to adopt innovative restorative practices (Njobe and Kaaria 2015).

This article specifically addresses three questions: What motivates women to invest time and effort in the restoration of land and forests? What obstacles do women face in implementing land

and forest restoration activities? How do restoration activities affect the living conditions of women?

Methodology

This article reports the results from two studies conducted in 2018–19 in the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso. The first was conducted in three villages in the rural commune of Laye, Kourwéogo Province, 50 km northwest of the country's capital Ouagadougou. Most of the farm and forest land in the area has been degraded by overexploitation. The second study was conducted in three villages in the commune of Zitenga, Oubritenga Province, where the shallow and relatively infertile soils that prevail are vulnerable to erosion and runoff. The Mossé communities involved in the study are patrilineal and practice agropastoralism. Various methods were used to carry out the studies.

In Laye, semi-structured interviews collected the experiences and perceptions of women and men farmers and of resource persons from decentralized state services, officials of various organizations involved in promoting land restoration, municipal advisers, village development councilors, and customary authorities. Participants were chosen to represent this diversity of backgrounds and experiences. In-depth interviews and oral histories with 40 women farmers aimed to understand their involvement and experiences in restoration and in women's self-help groups engaged in restoration. An observation grid and field log were used to record observations and events and compare women's narratives and actions. Moreover, five focus group discussions, each with eight members of women's self-help groups, were conducted. Themes included motivations for land restoration, preferences for different types of restorative practices, and factors that support or hinder women's adoption of such practices.



Fenced plots under the care of a women's group. Photo: B. Vinceti - Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

In Zitenga, interviews and direct observation were used to gather data on innovative practices as well as constraints to their development or adoption, and on differences between internal and external innovations. Data were also gathered on social connections through which innovative practices are shared and adapted, taking into account the economic and social range of the various actors involved. To this end, 118 interviews were conducted with women and men farmers, who were selected to represent different social and demographic groups, and with resource persons, including heads of local associations, customary authorities, local state officials, and village development councillors.

Restoration techniques

Farmers in Laye and Zitenga are involved in a range of restoration activities on farmland and in forest areas.

- *Zai* pits (staggered holes or basins of varying sizes, depending on soil type), to improve agricultural production and the recovery of degraded land, adapted from a traditional technique from Yatenga in northern Burkina Faso.

- Half-moon water catchments in agricultural fields, similar to *zai* pits but shallower and broader.
- Stone bunds to reduce overland flow after rain, reducing erosion and increasing water infiltration.
- Composting, practised either in heaps or pits.
- Mulching, using a layer some 2 cm thick of dry grass, equivalent to 3–6 t/ha.
- Charcoal making, including from agricultural by-products, using small metal kilns.
- Farmer managed natural regeneration, i.e. selecting, protecting and pruning native trees.
- Grass strips to prevent soil erosion.
- Fencing, to protect and allow natural regeneration in identified areas.
- Fire breaks to prevent bush fires spreading, and the creation of surveillance teams to monitor and extinguish fires.
- Improved cook stoves made from local clay, straw and dung, to reduce use of wood fuel.

Respondents focused on techniques that improve crop yields; few showed concern for the restoration of land and forests. Many farmers considered that the presence of trees reduces agricultural production and so were not in favour of farmer managed natural regeneration (FMNR). The characteristics of restoration techniques influence their adoption. For instance, agroforestry practices, including FMNR, as well as fencing as practised in the study sites (exclosures of 3 hectares) require sufficiently large areas of land and secure land tenure. Composting requires adequate access to organic waste, and the creation of stone bunds demands access to stones and a means of transporting them to the field. Some techniques, such as fencing and charcoal making, require financial

capital to purchase materials and are thus commonly financed and carried out by groups that can raise the necessary capital, rather than by individuals.

Factors influencing adoption

All of these requirements pose potential constraints to adoption, which are also different for men, women and young people. Local men and women identified five groups with different capacities for adopting land restoration techniques: (i) male heads of household (*kāsmḍambā*); (ii) male youth (*yapnā*); (iii) female farm heads (*pagb sen koodb ye*); (iv) widows (*pug-kōapā*); and (v) wives of migrant husbands (Table 1).

Table 1. Adoption of restoration techniques amongst five different social groups of women and men in Zitenga

	Male heads of household (<i>kāsmḍambā</i>)	Male youth (<i>yapā</i>)	Female farm heads (<i>pagb sen koodb ye</i>)	Widows (<i>pug-kōapā</i>)	Wives of migrant husbands
FMNR	✓		✓	✓	
Zai pits	✓		✓		✓
Half-moons	✓				
Stone bunds	✓		✓		
Grass strips	✓		✓		

Of the five groups, male heads of households (*kāsmḍambā*) have the most resources and knowledge to mobilize in restoration activities. For example, in addition to their rights to land, they have privileged access to their household's organic waste due to their status as household heads, and they can access animal dung due to their livestock rearing activities. As members of informal farmer organizations that receive NGO support, they have access to equipment and transportation for building stone bunds, and to training in restoration activities. They are also able to ask for help from other household members to carry out labour-intensive activities, such as digging *zai* pits. This is not the case for young men (*yapā*), who migrate seasonally, and have limited access to land and resources, and limited capacity to mobilize the labour of other household members in restoration. The absence of these young migrants during the time of land preparation further limits their ability to invest

their own labour in land restoration practices and restricts their familiarity with and knowledge of these practices.

Women also face many constraints to implementing restoration practices, as they do not enjoy the same rights and resources as their male counterparts due to entrenched gender norms. Gender is an important part of determining who does what, who makes what decisions, and who has access to resources, including benefits from restoration initiatives. For instance, in the study sites, farmers need to vouch for each other's capacities and reliability in order to join informal groups (farmer organizations) that will receive the support of NGOs. Through NGO support, they can obtain material and financial resources as well as training. Due to customary norms, women are not considered eligible to join these groups unless they live with an adult man (husband or son) who can vouch for them and support them with their

labour. Widows and wives whose husbands have migrated and who do not have adult sons thus tend to be excluded.

Gender is not the only factor that determines who will implement and potentially benefit from restoration practices. Whether a woman is married, where her husband resides, the size of the plots she has access to, and even whether she has adult male children can all influence the probability of her implementing restoration practices and gaining some of the benefits. Notable differences exist among groups of women, such as female farm heads (*pagb sen koodb ye*), widows (*pug-kōapā*), and women of migrant husbands.

Women who are heads of households (*pagb sen koodb ye*) do not work under the authority of their husbands, even though the husbands are present. This is a recent dynamic with a different organization of farm work and access to land; some polygamous male household heads subdivide family fields among their wives for each to cultivate with their children. These women have the power to decide what to grow and what practices to adopt on their plots. They tend to be members of farmer organizations, and this support helps them overcome the constraints associated with certain techniques, including *zai* pits, stone bunds and grass strips. An exception is the half-moon, which requires a great deal of labour and compost and which is rarely implemented in the Central Plateau villages. The *pagb sen koodb ye* group demonstrates that women are increasingly responsible for household food security, especially in polygamous households. Yet, although their decision-making capacity is strengthened in light of their added responsibilities, their land status remains unchanged. As wives, they do not own land, and the land allocated to them may be of average quality at best.

The widows (*pug-kōapā*) in the study are mainly 40 to 65 years of age. Those who live with the families of their spouses do not systematically benefit from their former husbands' fields. They cultivate plots that the husbands' family have given them and often find themselves with only small areas of degraded and less productive land. This group has the most difficulty in adopting restoration techniques. Having male adult children confers

advantages, such as membership in a farmer organization; as noted above, widows without sons are indirectly excluded. Status and access to resources further diminish with age. All the widows in the study knew the *zai* technique, which they say they learned from their late husbands. They are automatically excluded from practising fencing techniques, however, because they do not have enough land to make fencing practical. Stone bunds were implemented only by members of farmer organizations, who can count on the help of adult sons for physical strength, and on NGO support to farmer organization members to transport the stones. Finally, widows who are not part of farmer organizations targeted by NGOs lacked the knowledge to practise FMNR.

Wives of migrant husbands interviewed in the study were mostly 30 to 40 years old, and they cultivated fields that their husbands had inherited. These fields are larger and more fertile than those of widows. The situation of these wives allows them a certain autonomy in managing



Zai pits dug in women's collective fields. Photo: M. Elias - Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT



Improved cook stoves, reducing use of wood fuel. Photo: B. Vinceti - Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

agricultural work in their husband's absence. This group of women used *zai* pits and had some rights to use compost if they lived in the compound of their husband's parents. Factors that hampered the adoption of stone bunds, half-moons, FMNR and fencing are these women's lack of membership in farmer organizations, the unavailability of their husband's labour, and the limited size of their land.

Overcoming constraints to women's involvement

These studies showed that most women face important constraints in carrying out restoration activities. Socio-cultural norms and gendered power relations shape women's socio-economic role in society and limit their recognition as legitimate stakeholders in restoration processes. This results in women's lack of secure access to land; high levels of illiteracy; poor access to technical knowledge; economic dependence; low productivity due to limited access to assets, labour and inputs; lack of social power; limited participation in decision-making at the family and village level; and scarce time to devote to training in new techniques.

Women also face another set of constraints, including a lack of coordination between organizations, a disregard of their real needs and priorities, and delays in disbursements for financing agricultural tools. Gender inequalities further result in the benefits of interventions being skewed in favour of men over women, which has a major impact on women's productivity. Despite the many barriers they face in engaging in restoration, however, women can see a significant impact on their lives when they are able to practise restoration activities.

To address these constraints, women's self-help groups, with the support of some NGOs (such as Association Tiipaalga), are working to secure communal access to land for women's groups. The groups are primarily composed of widows and young women whose husbands have migrated. NGOs act as intermediaries between land-owners and women's groups to help the latter acquire rights to land. Some women's groups also secure land by maintaining good relations with land-owners and offering their labour — sowing crops or harvesting — in exchange for access to plots. Other women's groups (Nabonswendé, Neblaboum, Wend-Penga and Nongtaaba),



Mulching, using a layer of dry grass, in a fenced plot managed by women. Photo: B. Vinceti - Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

acquired land through their members' husbands, who they collectively help with farming at the beginning or end of the agricultural season. Once women acquire land, they fence it off to promote natural regeneration. They also plant species of trees and crops that offer income-generating opportunities.

The support of NGOs and adoption of restoration practices can make an important contribution to improving women's living conditions. As noted above, at the social level, forming groups to engage in restoration is a means to improve women's access and rights to land and other resources. Such groups also facilitate the acquisition of farming implements. One 31-year-old in Gantodogo explained how thanks to her membership of the group and the interventions of Association Tiipaalga, women have been able to obtain the use of land and loans for buying tools. A 50-year old member concurred, noting that before she joined the group she had no access to carts or wheelbarrows, but now she can do what she wants with the group's cart. In contrast, prior to joining, women had access to agricultural tools only from their husbands, and only when they were not in use.

In addition, Association Tiipaalga trains women in a range of land restoration techniques. Participants can then apply this knowledge to their household fields and personal plots, leading to increased agricultural profitability. In the study villages, restoration activities have also resulted in women's employment and income through the sale of non-timber forest products. Micro-credit provided by NGOs to women's groups have further enabled members to carry out activities likely to improve their income, resulting in an increase in women's individual and collective financial resources. Thanks to this income, women group members have been able to pursue new small business opportunities.

Conclusions

Social inequalities based on gender, socio-economic status, family structure, and other intersecting factors of social differentiation can strongly influence the ability of farmers to adopt land restoration techniques. Although there are differences across groups of women, the rural women in the study sites generally face several constraints in carrying out activities aimed at restoring land and forests. These are due to discriminatory

norms that limit women's access to and control over land, labour and other productive resources, as well as their perceived legitimacy as restoration stakeholders. When women are able to engage in restoration activities, this involvement is accompanied by social and economic benefits, including increased social capital, income and agricultural productivity. Ultimately, the quest for land security and economic opportunities that improve women's living conditions drive their engagement and involvement in land restoration.

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Cover photo: Members of a women's group engaged in restoration activities. Photo: B. Vinceti - Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT



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