

Addressing Gender in SASHA

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Investing in sweetpotato has great potential to improve women's incomes, and the nutrition and health of families as sweetpotato is traditionally a "woman's crop" in SSA. By explicitly monitoring designs of surveys and our delivery system projects to ensure women's needs were being sufficiently addressed and conducting complementary qualitative research, scientists and practitioners under SASHA have avoided costly errors and become more gender-aware.



■ Agronomist Jean-Claude assists women in getting varieties demanded by agro-processors (credit M. Randolph)

✦ What is the problem?

Women are at the center of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 50%-60% of food crops in the region are grown by women. Urban migration, which is predominantly male, increases pressures on women, making them an even more critical part of food production system. Women are the gatekeepers of household nutrition and health – making them the vital link between improved agricultural production and improved well-being of children.

Despite the predominant role of women in food and nutrition security in SSA, these fields remain dominated by men. The vast majority of agricultural

extension workers in the region are men and extension systems do not address the specific needs of women farmers, nor the crops they grow. Women's access to resources -- land, water, livestock, education and technology -- is far less than that of men.

Investing in sweetpotato has great potential to improve women's incomes and household nutrition and health. The crop offers numerous advantages – adaptability to marginal environments, flexibility in mixed farming systems, short maturation period, leaves that are nutritious and often highly-valued in sauces, ease of preparation, suitability as a complementary food for infants and young children, great acceptance by children and women as a snack food, and potential for sale to generate extra household income. Women and young children are particularly susceptible to vitamin A deficiency and targeted interventions using orange-fleshed sweetpotato can effectively address insufficient vitamin A intake.

However, as interest in sweetpotato grows and market demand increases, we anticipate more men will adopt sweetpotato production and large-scale, intensive production systems for sweetpotato may evolve. Such large-scale, intensive production systems usually have less involvement of women and as interest grows in sweetpotatoes, there is a risk of displacing women from the production systems. At the same time, focusing uniquely on women, and excluding men can backfire, leading to resentment and undermining women's ability to

participate. Careful and context specific consideration needs to be given to designing gender equitable commercialization interventions.

✦ **What do we want to achieve?**

We want to focus on women as producers giving special attention to their needs and preferences as they often have primary responsibility for family nutrition. We seek to have gender analysis as an integral part of our program strategies to ensure that women have a full voice in all project interventions and gain equitably from them. We want to understand gender dynamics within the household and on the farm, identifying when and how to address issues of concern to both men and women to mitigate the emergence of problems due to inequitable treatment.

✦ **How are we making it happen?**

A gender specialist is part of the SASHA team. Her role is to review the design of surveys, implementation plans, monitoring systems, communication and other strategies specific to each sub-program to ensure that gender concerns are fully considered and integrated into research and implementation activities. She is responsible for training collaborators to be gender-aware in

their work. Our pro-women strategies include:

- Integration of women's priorities into sweetpotato breeding objectives to ensure that new varieties include characteristics than women find desirable.
- Promotion of production and consumption of orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) varieties which have demonstrated impact on reducing vitamin A deficiency. Women of reproductive age and young children are most at risk of vitamin A deficiency.
- Analysis of agriculture extension and seed systems to develop approaches to facilitate outreach to women.
- Development of approaches to improve women's access to markets for their sweetpotato production.
- Development of storage and processing techniques that increases availability of sweetpotato and reduces post-harvest losses.

✦ **What have we achieved thus far?**

- Review of the gender dimension of all SASHA components and individual sub-projects including input to impact pathway analysis as well as operational research designs, strategic operational planning and annual work plans.
- Detailed proposal for incorporation of gender into SASHA monitoring and evaluation system. Specific gender targets and strategic propositions were formulated for a number of SASHA activities, followed by consultation and discussion with all component and sub-project leaders. Gender-specific components were included in all baseline surveys.
- Formative research on sweetpotato knowledge, attitudes and practices including focus group interviews with male and female farmers, and individual interviews with District Government officials and market vendors, was completed in the Lake Zone of northern Tanzania.
- Qualitative study on farmer practices and gender roles in the production and exchange of sweetpotato planting material in the Lake Victoria region, Tanzania.



✦ **Tanzanian farmer** Anastasia describes how she obtained her planting material (credit L. Badstue)

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