

Why do women matter in OFSP programs?



Orange-fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) can contribute to broader development goals by enhancing female empowerment



■ **Women are at the forefront of OFSP promotion and utilization**
(credit Marie-Josée Cook)

OFSP is a versatile crop which not only contributes nutritional and food security benefits but also improves food availability and livelihoods when farmers plant high yielding varieties, use better integrated crop management strategies and improved post-harvest practices, and value chains for new products are developed. So why should OFSP programs be concerned about the needs and interests of women when the crop can improve food and nutritional security and livelihoods for all?

The answer is simple: because women are the key to food and nutritional security at the household level and play a critical role in translating increased sweetpotato productivity into well-being and benefits for the whole household. It is only by investing in women as care providers, farmers, processors and income earners that OFSP can

contribute to nutritional and economic outcomes at household and national levels.

✦ **Strengthening women's role as nutrition decision makers:** Women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are typically responsible for child feeding and household nutrition. OFSP promotion, which touches on both nutrition and agricultural knowledge/skills improvement and decision-making, provides an entry point for introducing nutrition behaviour change, and a pathway to empowering women more broadly through group formation, literacy training, etc. By taking an empowerment approach, nutrition and related interventions enhance women's role as nutrition actors in their own right rather than seeing women as simply a way to improve child nutrition. It is also critically important to encourage men to take responsibility for household nutrition and food security in an equitable manner.

✦ **Empowering women as producers:** In many countries in SSA, sweetpotato is traditionally grown, sold and processed in small quantities by women. In such a context, women's lack of access to production resources and opportunities such as technologies, land, labour, education, and financial services, due to their lack of decision-making power within households, contributes to low sweetpotato yields. Introducing high yielding OFSP varieties to women farmers for production in field or homestead plots and providing extension advice on improved production practices, and improving access to inputs, offers the opportunity to increase women's productivity. This increase is likely to result in reduced vitamin A deficiency and improved food security since women are more likely than men to





■ Roadside trading in Zambia (credit J.Low)

use OFSP for child feeding and household consumption. One approach focuses on improving the kitchen gardens to serve as an entry point for other women's empowerment activities such as increased access to extension advice, literacy and numeracy training, and building capacity to become recognized OFSP experts in their community. This approach must also include an effort to improve overall nutritional practices.

However, in areas where men grow sweetpotato or are drawn into production as market demand increases, it is important to support the production activities of both genders so that women are not consigned to subsistence production of OFSP for household consumption, but have equal opportunity to engage in commercial production. OFSP related technologies, training and services must be gender-relevant and responsive. These interventions also provide an entry point for capacity development training to promote women's empowerment, education and behaviour change. As market demand for OFSP increases, encouraging gender responsive strategies within households such as training both men and women on food security planning and decision-making at household level can help ensure that sufficient quantities of harvested OFSP are set aside for household consumption and that OFSP income is used equitably.

✦ **Promoting women as income earners:** It is well known that when women gain additional income, they spend more of it than men on food, health, clothing and education for their children. Notably, higher income also strengthens women's intra-household bargaining power, which can contribute towards nutrition, health, and education outcomes for children, and improved status and a sense of personal achievement for women themselves.

While the higher productivity of many OFSP varieties enables women to sell surplus roots and processed products, there is a need to design gender equitable commercialized interventions that ensure women are not relegated to lower levels of OFSP marketing and processing value chains, but have opportunities also at higher levels. To ensure that women have equal opportunities all along the value chain for OFSP products, entrepreneurial training, financial services and other resources must be "women-friendly".

Ensuring that the needs and interests of women are addressed in OFSP production, processing and marketing enhances farming and food system efficiency, while at the same time supporting gender equity goals.

By taking an empowerment approach, OFSP can contribute to improving both women's rights and national development goals.

The Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) Project advocates for increased investment in orange-fleshed sweetpotato food-based approaches to combat vitamin A deficiency (VAD) among children less than five years old and their mothers. RAC also builds institutional capacity to design and implement gender sensitive projects to ensure wide access and utilization of orange-fleshed sweetpotato in selected African countries. Its efforts contribute to the broader Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative (SPHI) which aims to improve the lives of 10 million African families by 2020.

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