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Gendered Roles in Yam Cultivation and Food Security in West Africa

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Abstract

Yam is an important food and cash crop for most families in West Africa. Yam especially has sociocultural significance. It is used in fertility and marriage ceremonies, and many communities across West Africa celebrate yam festivals to mark the end of their harvest season. Nigeria and Ghana are the world's leading producer and exporter of yam respectively. As a consequence of this crucial role the yam sector plays in the two countries, the Community Action for improving farmer-saved Seed Yam (CAY-Seed) project, a Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)-Crops Research Institute (CRI) led project with funding from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) was initiated. The project sought to improve the quality of small holder farmer saved seed yam and its productivity at community level through positive selection, integrated crop management practices to control viruses and nematodes, and enhance capacity for increased food security and poverty reduction in Ghana and Nigeria. This paper is based on data gathered from surveys and focus group discussions between 2015 and 2016 on the planned intervention. The study finds that there are gendered roles in yam cultivation which are well defined and situated in traditional and patriarchal settings in the two countries. The use of ridges and trellises instead of mounds and single pole staking for instance has eased the previously identified tedious nature of yam production thereby attracting more females to cultivate yam. This has some new implications for ensuring food security especially at the household level. Female farmers mention that the quality and availability of seed yams, cost of inputs, climate variability and availability, quality and cost of land have adverse effects on the potential benefits they can derive from yam production. The paper concludes that the use of new techniques in yam production have the potential to increase the income of female farmers in the long run, empower women, and also promote food security. However, the adverse effects of seed quality, cost of inputs, and land related challenges need to be curtailed.

Keywords: Food security, gendered roles, yam cultivation

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