



Tropentag, September 14-16, 2022, hybrid conference

“Can agroecological farming feed the world?
Farmers’ and academia’s views”

Assessing the sustainability of improved vegetable varieties in southern Mali: A gender perspective

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Abstract

Improved vegetable varieties are expected to contribute towards higher yields and farm incomes, decrease malnutrition, and help overcome environmental production challenges. In order to achieve these goals and respond to calls for more gender equity, development interventions have long been targeting women vegetable farmers. However, little is known about gendered trait preferences and the sustainability of benefits that women and men may derive from improved vegetable cultivation. We investigated these gender differences with a mixed-methods case study in nine rural communities in southern Mali. We adopted a holistic sustainable intensification assessment framework (SIAF) that allowed us to shed light on the relations between farmers’ gendered preferences for tomato and African eggplant traits and the constraining and enabling conditions in the local vegetable farming context. Results suggest that despite women’s high participation in vegetable farming, their opportunities for sustainable benefits from their investments remain low. Among vegetable variety traits, women were most interested in shorter growing cycles and low susceptibility to environmental conditions and diseases, while tastier and high-yielding varieties were more appreciated in terms of sales. Such preferences can be explained by women’s specific challenges in production management specifically compared to men such as low control over farm income and inputs and limited capacity to circumvent problems with water sourcing, factors which increase the chances of harvest loss. For certain steps in farmwork, in fact, women had to depend on male labour, such as pesticide application, which local gender norms regard as a man’s responsibility. In contrast, men’s preferences rested on traits meeting customers’ appreciation, such as taste and appearance, reflecting into higher sales’ prices as well as into greater income stability. We suggest that integrating breeding efforts with investigations of the enabling or constraining environment including gender norms could help genetic intensification technologies to become more sustainable and equitable.

Keywords: African eggplant, gender, Mali, participatory varietal evaluation, sustainable intensification, tomato