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# Package 90, Script 14

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**The miracle plant** ‘z**abila/leele’ or henna: The turning point in food security for a smallholder woman farmer in northern Ghana**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

### Notes to broadcaster

Madam Amina Nabala Adam, 46 years old, lives in Diare village in the Northern Region of Ghana.

When Madam Amina Nabala Adam lost her husband 12 years ago, she tried all the coping strategies that Northern Ghanaian women typically use. These include buying and selling, where every day the northern woman is on a truck travelling from market to market, just to get enough to feed the family. Apart from the risk of vehicle accidents, buying and selling brings the problem of debt. Sometimes the women lose money instead of making profits. It also means any time or money they invest in the business is lost.

Many women and girls also migrate to the southern part of the country. But this has not really helped them. Rather, it exposes them to diseases such as HIV and AIDS, and causes them to drop out of school. This increases the numbers of school dropouts and early marriages in the Northern Region.

After her husband died, a small piece of land of about half an acre was all Madam Amina received as her share of his property. But even that is not hers – it will be transferred to her eldest son when he is old enough. She was the last of her husband’s four wives, whose grown-up children took over all the large fertile farms, the livestock and other assets.

Madam Amina found the solution to the constant hunger in her family by planting a local plant *zabila* – called henna in English – that is used to produce fine dyes. Selling the first crop of *zabila* to local cosmetics businesses helped her to diversify into growing maize and groundnuts and increased her family income.

A community radio producer named Lydia Ajono has been following the story of Madam Amina Nabala Adam. Madam Amina cultivates the *zabila* plant because she can sell the powdered leaves of the plant and pay her children’s school fees. It helps her family survive hungry periods in the year, improves their nutrition, and increases thefamily income.

This script is based on actual interviews. You could use this script as inspiration to research and write a script on a similar topic in your area. Or you might choose to produce this script on your station, using voice actors to represent the speakers. If so, please make sure to tell your audience at the beginning of the program that the voices are those of actors, not the original people involved in the interviews.

*Signature tune for 20 seconds*

**Host:** My dear listeners, it’s time for our favourite program, *Pukpriba Saha* (*Editor’s note: Pukpriba Saha means “*Farmers’ hour*” in the Dagbali language of Ghana’s Northern Region)*.Welcome. In today’s edition, we look at some of the discoveries and achievements of the women farmers in our country. This is your presenter, Lydia Ajono.

*Signature tune up and out under presenter*

**Host:** In Ghana we have heard over and over again that women make up about fifty one percent of the country’s population. But how much of their contribution to the national economy has been documented? In farming, women’s contributions have always been thought to be limited to less important crops. These include vegetables, beans and sometimes groundnuts.

Women may have access to land for farming. But what type of land is it? It may be infertile land that has been abandoned by male farmers, or it may be land that is controlled by a man, with the woman as a farm labourer.

Even when a woman has the opportunity to farm, it is very expensive and difficult for her to pay for inputs such as improved seeds or fertilizers. Sometimes, society rates women farmers as lesser contributors to the household income. This makes women have low self-esteem.

When Madam Amina Nabala Adam lost her husband 12 years ago, she was faced with raising five children alone. In the midst of these difficulties, Madam Amina remembered a traditional plant called *zabila* or henna and the benefits of growing it. This wonderful plant had been introduced to her by her mother in-law several years before. Madam Amina told me that *zabila* had been one of the survival plants for village women when there were food shortages in the household. I asked her what the secret of cultivating *zabila* was.

**Madam Amina:** I remember my mother in-law advised me never to stop planting *zabila*. I used to help my mother-in-law many years ago to grow a few plants. One day, after my husband’s death, when things in life and the upkeep of my children were going from worse to worse, I set out in search of *zabila* seed.

I started my search in the old farm of my mother in-law. I found a few seeds, planted a bed, nursed the seeds, and watered them daily. When the first rains came, I transplanted them onto a one acre piece of land that my late husband leased to me before his death.

And I discovered the solution to food insecurity in this wonder plant we call *zabila* in the Dagbali language, and which is known as *leele* in the Hausa language that is used by market women. At this time, it was almost extinct in northern Ghana, especially in Diare village.

*Traditional music recorded in villages*

**Host:** Madam Amina spent all her time on the farm with her last born child on her back, despite the scorching sun. Her other four children were also with her. She promised her children that she would produce food from *zabila*, enough to feed and take care of them. Little did she know how *zabila* would help her to improve her living conditions.

**FX:** *Village ambience – sound of goats and chickens in distance*

**Madam Amina:** (*Laughing, with sounds of maize being cleaned in a container in the background*) *Zabila* is my life and my family. When you cultivate *zabila*, it is for life. Your children and grandchildren will benefit from it.

When you have cows and sell one cow without a baby, that ends the life of that cow. But *zabila* is always sprouting and you continue to harvest it. It does not need fertilizers. All it needs is for the farmer to keep weeds away from it. I assure you it will help you earn money to support your family.

Today, I can pay for all my children’s school fees, which range from $500 to $800 yearly. My five children are well-fed and clothed. About 12 years ago, I was in misery, without help after the death of my husband. Being the fourth wife, I had no share of his property. I had to leave my matrimonial home to settle here in one hut with the children.Standing by me listening is one of my daughters. She always helps me on the farm.

**Host:** What is your name, and how do you feel, listening to your mother?

**Sister Rahinatu:** My name is Rahinatu Adam. I am very proud of my mother.

**Host:** What do you do?

**Sister Rahinatu:**I am the second daughter of my mother. I completed senior high school and I am now a non-formal education facilitator in the village. My mother attends the adult literacy class at night. When our father died, I was in primary school. My mother paid the school fees for me to complete my senior secondary education.

**Host:** What are your plans for the future?

**Sister Rahinatu:** I am preparing to enroll in a tertiary institute to learn business and accounting. I am confident my mother will support me financially for the course.

**Host:** Now, listeners, join me on a walk through Madam Amina’s *zabila* farm at the western corner of the village.

*Sounds of birds*

**Host:** Tell me, Madam Amina, what are the most memorable events in your life on this farm?

*Pause, then sounds of walking on dry leaves*

**Madam Amina:** I can’t hold back my tears when I remember that day years ago when I had to weed this piece of land alone. I worked from early morning to late evening without any proper meal. It was a difficult task for me to bear. But I was determined to farm to make income so that I could feed my children.

Right now, I can’t say a word about farming without mentioning the name of my good friend *zabila*.We harvest *zabila* with a sickle. When do I know the time to harvest? It is when the crops are so high that you cannot see the chickens roaming inside the farm.

**Host:** How long does *zabila* take to grow?

**Madam Amina:** It takes one rainy season or three to six months until harvest. Even if there is a drought, there is hope of a good harvest as soon as the rain falls. *Zabila* plants can last for five to twelve years on the same piece of land, depending on the care given to them.

**Host:** I understand that you have a second farm a few kilometres away from here. How many bags of *zabila* can you harvest from this farm?

**Madam Amina:** I can harvest many baskets a day. After drying the *zabila*, I have seven to ten 80 kilo sacks of *zabila* powder.

Last year, I sold all these bags and had money to grow two acres of groundnuts. I also had money to buy enough food for my children and pay for their school fees. Normally, I harvest the leaves every three weeks, which gives me a total of about eight to 10 bags. During the rainy season from July to November, I harvest more. In the dry season, I pound the leaves into powder and store it in bags. A bag fetches from $30 to $50 U.S. dollars.

I built this house from the profits I received from selling *zabila*. I also used some of the money to grow groundnuts and soya beans. I had a very good harvest from the groundnuts, which brought me more money. Then I grew two acres of maize. I use all the grain that I grow to feed my family. So now we don’t have food shortages in the house. If I need anything else, I sell *zabila* to finance it.

**Host:** Where do you market the *zabila*?

**Madam Amina:** I sell most of it to my special customers in Kumasi, Ghana and also in Burkina Faso, who regularly place orders for my products. I also sell to some of the market women in Diare village.

*Traditional women’s song*

**Host:** Apart from your family, who else has benefited from your labour, and what impact has your discovery made on others in your community?

**Madam Amina:** (*Laughing*) I would say that almost all the women in Diare are into *zabila* farming now. There are only a few women who think it is tedious to weed their farms. So, instead of weeding, they buy and sell *zabila* powder to make some income. Three years ago, my women’s group was awarded a prize by the district agriculture office as the best groundnut farmers in the district. We use the income from selling *zabila* to employ farm labour to expand our groundnut farms. So we received this award because of *zabila*. This year, I have been able to deposit about $6,000 at the Agriculture Development Bank for a tractor – without their usual demand for collateral.

Because of *zabila*, I have travelled to many places that I would have never visited. Anytime I am invited to share my story, I go with some of the members of my women’s group.

When there are child naming, marriage or funeral ceremonies in the community, we meet in my house to plan how to support the woman in need. Currently I am sponsoring six other children in the village who are either orphans or very needy.

*Music recorded in the village*

**Host:** I asked the agricultural extension officer who has just been posted to Diare whether he thinks Madam Amina really has an innovative idea for solving food insecurity in the area.

**Mr. Konlaa:** I am impressed by her hard work: she is very industrious. I was surprised to see that the women’s groups she is leading have received so many awards. One of the awards was from the Iranian Agricultural Project, and another was from the Integrated Tamale Fruit Company. I can testify that Madam Amina has not only diversified into other crops such as soya beans, but also has the economic capacity to reduce the perennial food shortages in the household.

**Host:** The benefits and uses of henna in Ghana are many. The flowers are used to make perfumes, hair dyes, and herbal medicine. In the local arts and culture market centres, henna is used to dye and ornament drumheads and other leather goods. Some herbal producers such as traditional healers use henna to repel some insect pests and mildew on crops or vegetables.

*Bring up music from the village for 20 seconds*

**Host:** The story of Madam Amina shows that northern Ghanaian women are up to the task of ensuring food security in their homes. This is despite the challenges of the land tenure system that they face. Remember, Amina’s story is just the beginning – there are many women innovators. Till next time, when I shall tell another story, bye for now.

*Signature tune up and out*

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Lydia Ajono, Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN), a Farm Radio International broadcasting partner.

Reviewed by: Helen Hambly Odame, Associate Professor, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph.

## Information sources

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