



GENDER Impact
Platform

Gender and food safety: addressing hidden challenges in Uganda's urban fresh fruit and vegetable markets

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Summary

Africa's collective position on food systems underscores the necessity of unified efforts to enforce food safety standards, thereby supporting the development of local and regional markets. This paper assesses the roles of men, women, and the youth in maintaining food safety within urban markets for fresh fruits and vegetables and identifies the key challenges in these settings. While men, women, and the youth engage in basic marketing tasks such as product identification, selection, and purchase, women and the youth also focus on ensuring food safety by meticulously washing, sorting, packaging, and adding value to produce to cater for customer needs. Despite their critical roles, women and the youth face significant barriers in accessing the resources necessary to enhance food-handling practices, such as information, sheltered stalls, storage facilities, and proper water and sanitation infrastructure, along with investment in facilities and resources that enable them to undertake safe food-handling practices.

Key results

- Food safety remains a key concern globally owing to the rise in foodborne illnesses affecting the society and crippling health systems.
- Urban markets are critical distribution points for fresh fruits and vegetables, especially for the urban poor, but are often replete with food safety challenges.
- Women and young people are key players in urban markets, yet gaps exist in their access to the resources that affect food safety practices.
- Awareness on food safety policies and by-laws and decision-making are limited, particularly among women and young people, with a high potential to negatively impact food safety.

Introduction

Food safety is critical for public health and sustainable food systems, yet Uganda faces significant challenges in ensuring that its food is safe. Annually, 1.3 million people suffer from foodborne illnesses (FAO, 2022) arising largely from contaminated fresh produce, which accounts for over 60% of the cases (Roesel, 2014). Informal markets, where most fresh fruits and vegetables

are sold, often lack essential infrastructure like refrigeration, clean water, and sanitation facilities, increasing the risk of food contamination. Weak policy frameworks and limited institutional coordination hinder effective regulation and enforcement of food safety standards in Uganda. Gender disparities add another layer of complexity, as women and the youth, who play key roles in informal markets, face barriers in access to resources, training and equitable participation in markets (Visser & Wangu, 2021). These challenges undermine public health, strain health care systems, and limit economic opportunities for vulnerable populations.

Methods

A market diagnostic study was undertaken in December 2023 to analyze gender and food safety aspects in urban fresh fruit and vegetable markets. The study covered three public and two private markets in Kampala and Luwero, which collectively accommodated approximately 4,100 traders, 52% of whom sold fresh fruits and vegetables (Table 1). Data were gathered through focus group discussions held separately for men, women and the youth. A total of 188 market participants were interviewed, comprising 56 men and 132 women, of whom 67 were people younger than 35 years. In

Table 1. Sampled markets and population

Market*	Total market participants	% selling fresh fruits and vegetables	Formal stall ownership (% of total market participants)	
			Under shelter	Open space
Kalerwe Bivamuntuyo market	500	100	70	30
Bugoloobi market	400	42	100	0
KCCA Kasubi market	1,600	38	56	44
Nakawa Market	1,350	57	90	10
Movit Market Wobulenzi	250	36	100	0
Total	4,100	52	76	24

Note: *Kalerwe and Movit Market Wobulenzi were private and the rest were public.

addition, interviews were held with two female and five male market leaders. A feedback and validation meeting was held in September 2024 involving market leaders and representatives of vendors and the Kampala Capital City Authority.

Key results

Key result 1. Differentials exist in the roles played by men, women, and the youth

The market surveys revealed distinct gender- and age-related differences in the roles played by men, women, and the youth in the urban markets. Women and the youth were more actively engaged in activities that enhance food quality and safety such as washing, sorting, value addition and packaging of products. These often-overlooked roles are crucial for food safety and ensuring that high-quality products reach consumers. Policy frameworks must account for these role differentials, ensuring that interventions are tailored to support the specific contributions of men, women, and the youth.

Key result 2. Gender disparities in accessing resources critical for food safety are pronounced

Access to essential resources such as storage and cooling facilities was limited in all the sampled markets. Water and toilet facilities were grossly inadequate relative to the vendor population. The toilets labeled as public and managed by market authorities were few with a maximum of two unisex toilets per market and lacked gender-specific labeling. Many of these facilities were poorly maintained, had a high usage load, and often lacked adequate water, handwashing facilities, and basic hygiene items such as soap and tissue paper. Such a situation affects women the most, since they have more privacy and personal hygiene needs. The

associated toilet use charges undermined vendors' profits. The challenges disproportionately impact women and young vendors, who rely heavily on these resources for safe food handling. Addressing these disparities requires targeted investments in gender-sensitive infrastructure such as accessible sanitation facilities, affordable storage solutions, and solar-powered refrigeration technologies. Such interventions will not only enhance food safety but also create a more equitable and sustainable business environment for all vendors.

Key result 3. Market infrastructure to support women and youth vendors is insufficient

A significant proportion of market vendors, particularly women and the youth, operated in facilities with inadequate infrastructure. For example, 24% of the vendors, 75% of whom were youth and 25% were women, worked in open spaces rather than shaded stalls, exposing their produce to environmental risks that compromise quality and safety. The high cost of shaded stalls was prohibitive for many small and medium-sized enterprises run by women and the youth, limiting their ability to secure safer spaces for their businesses. In some markets, space for vendors was said to be inadequate, which forced some of them to move to non-business locations such as streets and roadsides. However, some vendors were said to prefer the streets even when secured business spaces were available within designated market grounds, where they considered competition to be unfair. Addressing these infrastructural gaps is critical for improving food safety standards and ensuring the quality of the produce sold in the markets. Targeted interventions such as subsidies, low interest loans, and public investment in market infrastructure can help make shaded stalls and other facilities more accessible and affordable.

Key result 4. Awareness on food safety practices is limited

While vendors were generally familiar with the fundamental market regulations for safe food handling, which included maintaining cleanliness in their stalls, avoiding placing of produce directly on the ground, covering their hair, and wearing aprons, their understanding of the broader food safety policies or practices was limited. Vendors generally confounded food quality, especially freshness, with safety and paid more attention to food appearance and physical qualities than its safety. Insufficient inspection, surveillance, and training by government authorities for improved food safety exacerbated these issues. Gender-responsive training programs and behavior change campaigns can address this gap, equipping all vendors, and especially women and the youth, with the skills needed to maintain food safety.

Key result 5. Decision-making on market regulations and resource management was limited for women and the youth

Market regulations and resource management decisions were often dominated by market authorities and influential male stakeholders, sidelining the voices of women and youth vendors. Availability of sanitation facilities, childcare spaces, and shelter for stalls was frequently overlooked in favor of provision of amenities like parking and offloading zones. Inclusive decision-making processes that involve women and the youth in market associations and committees can help address these gaps, ensuring that policies and practices reflect the needs of all vendors. By fostering diverse representation in leadership roles, markets can become more equitable, functional, and responsive to the concerns of marginalized groups.

Policy recommendations

- **Gender-sensitive policy design.** Develop policies that explicitly incorporate gender considerations, empowering women and the youth as key stakeholders in shaping food safety processes, and provide equitable access to resources and training.
- **Enhanced access to market infrastructure and hygiene facilities.** Market authorities and the government must invest in infrastructure improvements, including in clean water, hygiene facilities, and shaded stalls. These interventions should be proportionate to the number of vendors and be designed to meet the specific needs of women and the youth.
- **Inclusive decision-making.** Promote the inclusion of women and the youth in decision-making processes within the market associations and committees. This can be achieved by encouraging their leadership and representation, ensuring that their perspectives shape market policies and practices.
- **Gender-inclusive training.** Implement food safety training programs tailored to the roles and needs of women, men, and the youth in urban markets.
- **Comprehensive food safety awareness campaigns.** Launch awareness campaigns targeting consumers, vendors, and policy-makers to foster a culture of accountability and collective action toward food safety.
- **Financial support and resources.** Provide targeted financial support such as micro-loans, grants, and subsidies to help women and the youth invest in food safety practices and infrastructure.

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