

Evaluating the contributions of women-run market stalls, kiosks and eateries in Nairobi, Kenya.

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Vendor at Wape Wape market, Mukuru kwa Njenga, © AMT

Abstract

A feminist and intersectional perspective is necessary to fully understand vital and important role women play in the urban food system, especially in informal settlements and among the poor. Despite the prominent position that women hold in informal food vending, they struggle with many challenges. It is important to change the perspective, to understand the many other important functions that informal food vendors perform for the community. This provides the basis for a way forward to provide sustainable targeted support for informal vendors. We argue for a stronger focus on women's marginalisation in urban and rural areas than that described in the HLPE-FSN Report #19 entitled "Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation." This focus needs to be fully integrated into the policy recommendations discussed at CFS 2024. Our policy recommendations follow the "working with informality" approach and aim to strengthen the organisation of informal vendors through associations to ensure that they are heard and to establish peer-to-peer dialogue.

Introduction

Though Kenyan society is undoubtedly changing, it remains deeply patriarchal. Women remain marginal in political leadership and are largely excluded from decision-making in the social and economic spheres (Simiyu 2018). They are also underrepresented in management and leadership positions in business and administration. For example, they make up just 24 percent (job cadres M to P) of public-sector employees (Mutuma 2022).

The marginalisation of women is also visible in the country's food systems. In rural Kenya, women play the main role in ensuring that their families are not only well fed but also well-nourished despite having very limited power over productive resources (HLPE 2024). Women account for up to 70 percent of agricultural workers in Kenya (Empow'her Global 2024) and are in large measure the holders of indigenous food knowledge, yet they struggle with limited access to agricultural land and capital for production (Brückner 2020; KIPPRA 2024). In urban food systems, where the main activities are in distribution and retail, women play a critical but often overlooked role in informal food vending, supplying around 50 percent of food consumers in Nairobi (Tschirley et al. 2010) and 90 percent of food consumers in urban informal settlements such as Mukuru with most foodstuffs (ongoing research by AMT and TMG Research).

With limited opportunities in formal food vending, which is dominated by local and multi-national retail giants, women have found space in informal food vending. Their work is crucial to securing household livelihoods and overall food security in Nairobi. Informal food vendors also play important roles beyond the supply of food in many low- and middle-income countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia (GAIN 2020).

This opinion brief shows how informal female food vendors are marginalised by a modernised, formalised, and growth-oriented urban food system (HLPE 2024). This opinion brief echoes the perspective of the HLPE-FSN Report #19 (2024) that “traditional and informal components of food systems are essential for food security and livelihoods in U-PU [urban and peri-urban] food systems and should be strengthened.” We further highlight what is at stake in the continued lack of support and disempowerment of informal food vendors in terms of livelihoods as well as the additional value offered by informal food vending. This brief goes beyond HLPE to offer concrete recommendations to support the informal food sector in Nairobi and to create an enabling environment by strengthening the voices, capacity and organisation of informal food vendors. Unlike formal food vending, informal food vending is, in most cases, a livelihood activity rather than a business endeavour. It is a survival strategy that comes with a lot of challenges such as limited access to capital, high food prices, inadequate business skills, poor infrastructure like

roads and drainage systems, poor waste management, lack of storage and cooling, exposure to health and safety risks, punitive responses, security issues and harassment, especially in the early morning and at night. TMG Research’s Urban Food Futures programme coined the phrase “trading to eat” to describe the activities of informal food vendors in Nairobi (Paganini & Weigelt 2023). The informal food sector as the main point of food access for the urban poor represents one side of “trading to eat”. The other is that the informal sector provides work and income for households. In our case study in the informal settlement of Mukuru in Nairobi, over two thirds of the vendors are women. Household income data for these vendors show that food vending is the only source of household income for most of the vendors (ongoing research by AMT/TMG Research).

Therefore, our key points of contribution to this year’s CFS debates to strengthen urban and peri-urban food systems are:

- ▶ Using feminist and intersectional lens to understand that the contributions of women to a holistic, inclusive and resilient food system go beyond food supply.
- ▶ “Working with informality” as an approach to economic and social sustainability in food systems.
- ▶ Strengthening the informal food sector with organisations based on established networks within the community requires an enabling environment provided by the state.



Vendor in Mukuru
Kwa Njenga, © AMT



Meeting of Vendors Group Mukuru Safina Fresh in Mukuru Kwa Njenga, © AMT

Food for thought beyond the HLPE

The informal food market is often regarded as inefficient and unorganised and associated with unsafe food in contrast to formal food markets (Racaud et al. 2018). While the HLPE-FSN Report #19 addresses the important role and functions of informal vendors, it does not do so from a feminist perspective. The HLPE states that informal vendors “meet the needs of lower-income consumers by selling in small units, offering credit and often opening for long hours to meet the needs of urban commuters” (HLPE 2024, p. 64) and informal vendors “selling traditional, culturally appropriate foods” (HLPE 2024, p. 47). The importance of women in the informal food trade is also discussed (HLPE 2024, p. 34).

However, the report lacks a strong feminist and intersectional perspective on structural marginalisation and gender equality. Therefore, the analysis and the emphasis on other important contributions made by women in the urban food system lack depth. Women are the crucial backbone of the urban food system and should be given more support.

This text seeks to expand on this, adding substance and presenting current and concrete data as well as concrete recommendations based on action research in relation to the establishment of a Food Vendors Association in Mukuru, an informal settlement in Nairobi.

During the formalisation and modernisation of the food sector, women are often left behind, as well-paid, skilled jobs go predominately to men. This dilemma is portrayed by The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN):

»In many countries, discriminatory gender norms exclude women from income-generating opportunities offered by cities, reducing food security for themselves and their families. As a result, women often resort to operating within informal livelihood channels, frequently as food vendors, relying on social networks to procure both food and money. And these informal markets are often overlooked by urban planners«

Research by GAIN, in Morris & Mbuya 2024, n. p.

Many initiatives working to improve the lives of women in developing countries tend to focus on women’s basic rights and safety issues such as the elimination of domestic violence. Support for women’s economic empowerment needs to become a high priority as well (HLPE 2024). Negative perceptions of informal food vending play a significant role in further shrinking an already very slim space for women in food distribution. As global food policy trends focus on growing consumer demands in relation to food quality, traceability, safety and quality, informal food vending tends to be ignored by policymakers or regarded as a hindrance.

In 2012, the Organisation Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) conducted a “Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS)” in Accra (Ghana), Ahmedabad (India), Bangkok (Thailand), Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Bogota (Colombia), Durban (South Africa), Lahore (Pakistan), Lima (Peru), Nakuru (Kenya), and Pune (India). This study (WIEGO 2024) revealed how informal workers support communities by providing many households’ main source of income. The informal sector is also linked to the formal economy as many vendors clean streets and improve safety for customers and provide them with friendly personal service. Other contributions by informal vendors include job creation (e. g., porters, security guards, transport operators, storage providers) and revenue generation (e. g., payments for licenses, permits, fees, fines and taxes). Finally, informal trade on the street “adds vibrancy to urban life and in many places is considered a cornerstone of historical and cultural heritage” (WIEGO 2024).

Despite their contributions, vendors face many challenges and are often overlooked as economic agents. Unlike other businesses, they are often hindered rather than helped by municipal policies and practices.

From a case study to CFS (from Mukuru to the world)

Situated at the centre of Nairobi's industrial zone, the Mukuru informal settlement occupies 280 hectares and comprises six villages. Since the 1980s, Mukuru, like many of Nairobi's informal settlements, has grown rapidly due to poverty, rapid urbanisation, poor urban planning, and corrupt land resource management (Mutinda et al. 2020). Today, Mukuru is home to more than 100,000 households (Lines et al. 2020) and a vibrant informal economy. Although they occupy less than five percent of the city's residential landmass, informal settlements like Mukuru are home to more than 60 percent of Nairobi's population (Mallory et al. 2020). High population density leads to extensive sanitation challenges, with the majority of the 300,000 residents sharing just 3,863 pit latrines (Njoroge & Musya 2021). Public services such as electricity, water, and solid waste management are limited. In the absence of state intervention, gaps have been filled by informal service providers and cartels. While these services create employment, they are effectively a tax on Mukuru residents and have been described by AMT/Muungano as a poverty penalty that impinges on residents' wellbeing through unsafe and inadequate electricity and water supply (Mutinda et al. 2020).

In Nairobi, as in many other cities of the Global South, a considerable proportion of food vending businesses are a survival mechanism for poor households (over 70 percent of interviewed vendors have no other source of household income (AMT/TMG Research ongoing research). Unlike formal food supply chains, informal food vending is dominated by women. A survey conducted by the Akiba Mashinani Trust and TMG Research estimates that 74 percent of informal food vendors in Mukuru are women. That is partly due to a lack of income generation alternatives. The better-paid formal jobs are located outside the informal settlement, often in factories, in the service industry of the business district, or in hotels near the airport or the upmarket areas in the north and west of the city. What remains for women are activities like food vending in the informal neighbourhoods.



Women preparing food in Mukuru, Nairobi, © AMT

Despite many challenges, the informal sector plays a key role in supplying poor urban communities with food. Informal vendors take over crucial last-mile logistics and retail functions in informal settlements. Tschirley et al. (2010) estimate that over 50 percent of food purchases across Nairobi are made from informal traders, with poor households from informal settlements accounting for the bulk of such purchases. Over 90 percent of households in Mukuru use the informal food market to purchase food items (ongoing research by AMT & TMG Research).

Our case study/participatory action research with informal food vendors in Mukuru revealed that informal food vending provides numerous additional functions beyond the mere sale of food. These include selling food on credit to customers, offering pre-cooked meals and thus lowering the cost of energy-intensive staples such as cereals, and providing care-giving services for children and advice on nutrition for women, youth and children. Unfortunately, these critical additional services are rarely recognised by local and national government and other stakeholders. On the contrary, informal food vending continues to be demonised as unsafe.

Women-run informal food market stalls, kiosks and eateries in informal settlements provide more than just food and income, offering also unique cultural and social functions. Nairobi's informal settlements, involving many different people from diverse cultural backgrounds also have an impact on habits around food and nutrition (HLPE 2024). Knowledge and experiences of different foods and cuisines are shared by the informal vendors and eateries. They provide avenues for knowledge sharing and exchange on different types of food, recipes and nutrition. Informal food vendors also offer portioned food items depending on household/consumer needs, pre-cooking of cereals and food on credit to customers in financially precarious situations and in emergencies. They are also an important source of cooked food for a large proportion of the poor population in informal settlements, who lack the means of preparing their own food.

Women's dominance in informal food vending has earned small grocery shops the tag 'mama mboga', which loosely translates as "the vegetable lady". It is also common in Nairobi to refer to women-run informal food kiosks as 'kwa mathe', meaning "mum's place". These names are a testament to the high regard accorded by consumers to women-run food businesses. Vending near home also benefits women vendors since they have lower childcare and transport costs and can better combine their livelihoods and household duties (Sverdlik 2016). On the other hand, women struggle with security issues around markets when purchasing goods at night and often suffer violence and harassment, a factor mentioned by all of the female vendors interviewed for this study (Research by AMT/TMG, 2024).

Policy recommendations

- ▶ Use a feminist and intersectional lens to understand the contributions women make to an inclusive and resilient food system beyond food supply.
- ▶ Recognise informal food vendors as part of the solution to food shortage for the urban poor and therefore advocate for the approach "Working with Informality" (Vorley 2023).
- ▶ Strengthen the voice and organisation of informal food vendors by establishing food vendors' associations based on established networks within the community. This requires an enabling environment by the state.
- ▶ Deepen women's authority and power within food systems to the benefit of all (Morris & Mbuya 2024).

Conclusion

Women still have limited access to resources, infrastructure and decision-making platforms across the food systems, even though they play an integral role in food systems, from planting seeds to organising (informal) markets (Morris & Mbuya 2024). Systematically ignoring the important functions but also the challenges of women in informal food vending contributes to systematic marginalisation through unsupportive policy, criminalising bylaws and exclusionary financing frameworks. While informal food vending has challenges in dealing with infrastructural undersupply, it remains a major pillar of the urban food system.

About

Urban Food Futures is a Science-with-Society programme. With hubs in Nairobi, Kenya and Cape Town, South Africa, our research is focused on informal settlements and low-income urban neighbourhoods that are largely locked out of formal service provision and governance structures. With informality as the connecting thread, we explore pathways to transform food systems and realise the right to food for all.

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