

Women are shaping agribusinesses



Across Africa, women are more present than ever along agro-processing and food business value chains. It's about more than farm work. An impressive 63 per cent are now engaged in off-farm activities ranging from processing and packaging to marketing and retail.

BY CONRAD ONYANGO,

Women across Africa are fast taking up space in processing, packaging, distribution and food service businesses, driven by shifting diets as incomes grow and cities expand. Gender experts say a rising middle class and "new economic" realities are reshaping how the continent eats, with a growing appetite for convenience opening new opportunities in the informal food economy where women are already dominant.

AGRA's Lead on Gender Integration, Winnie Osulah, told bird that several forces have come together to propel women into off-farm agribusiness.

"First, urbanisation has changed diets, cities want more processed and prepared foods, so demand has exploded for processing, packaging, distribution, marketing, retail and food services where women already have a strong foothold," said Osulah.

She noted changing migration patterns in rural economies where more men are leaving for better paying city jobs, giving women greater responsibility in farm adjacent businesses, open-

ing access to larger and more lucrative markets.

"Off-farm work also offers women financial freedom, in the face of limited access to productive assets such as land," said Osulah.

Targeted government and donor programs, easier access to credit and training, better rural roads and simpler entry into informal food markets have also been linked to a sharp rise in women driven agro processing ventures across the continent.

A new report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows between 2005 and 2022, women's employment in off-farm agrifood systems grew from 21 to 29 per cent across sub-Saharan Africa.

"The growth in off-farm agrifood employment across sub-Saharan Africa is part of a broader transformation in the agricultural and rural sectors, whereby employment is decreasing in agriculture but expanding in agro-industrial areas and production of ready-to-eat foods," the FAO report states.

The biggest agro-processing boom is in West Africa recording the sharpest gains from 29% to 47%, with Osulah attributing it to a rooted history of trade and infrastructure, creating a vi-

brant ecosystem for small businesses to scale.

"West Africa is ahead due to deep traditions of women's trade and processing, strong women's networks and cooperatives, lively cross-border markets, and investments in storage, cold chains and wholesale markets," she explained.

She pointed to cassava and tomato processing enterprises led by women in Nigeria and Ghana, the spread of labor-saving technology among women's groups in Uganda, and horticulture ventures in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, including moringa, shea and mango processing. Nearly half of Africa's agrifood workforce is female, the highest share of any region in the world. In 2022, agrifood systems employed three out of every four working women on the continent.



She says...

We're not using a blanket approach and assuming that all the women who are running agribusinesses, whether in production, processing, logistics or trade, have the same issues," Amoah said. AGRA, she said already hosts more than 14,000 women-led agribusinesses across the continent, through Value4Her, a platform that links women to markets and tailored programs.

AGRA's Director for Gender and Youth, Nana Amoah,

ment.

While 43 per cent of women still work in agriculture, a striking 63 per cent are now engaged in off-farm activities ranging from processing and packaging to marketing and retail. Their footprint is most visible in food processing and services, where women account for 73 per cent of jobs, according to the report.

As rapid urbanisation, rising demand for processed foods and stronger cooperative structures is fuels this shift, it signals huge opportunities for investors. The African Development Bank estimates the continent's agri-food sector will balloon from current US\$280 billion to US\$1 trillion by 2030. According to FAO, cooperatives, producer associations and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), where women make up 70 per cent of members, are helping to push women's progress in agri-food systems.

Authors of the report link VSLAs with higher agricultural yields, improved nutrition, greater access to healthcare and boosting women's bargaining power in markets traditionally dominated by men.

During a panel discussion of Women in Agrifood systems at the Africa food summit 2025 in Dakar, Senegal the African Development Bank underscored the urgency of putting resources in the hands of women to enable them to continue thriving in agrifood systems.

"One of the things we need to really be clear about is that we need to put resources in the hands of women. We are using this new evidence to transform how we design our investments so that they are centering women who are working in agriculture," said AfDB Director for Gender, Women and Civil Society, Dr. Jemimah Njuki.

So far, AfDB has approved US\$2.8 billion in financing for women entrepreneurs across 45 countries, directly benefitting more than 24,000 women. Njuki said Bank is also embedding gender into national and regional policy frameworks through the Country Food and Agriculture Delivery Compacts, which commit governments to prioritising women's land rights, care infrastructure and participation in high-value chains.

These includes US\$ 289 billion channelled into rice value chains in DR Congo, tens of millions targeting women in agri-processing and major investment in agro-industrial processing zones in Nigeria.