



Strengthening Food Safety Through Gender-Sensitive Interventions Among Food Vendors in Nairobi's Informal Settlements

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Key Messages:

- ◆ Over 60% of Nairobi residents live in informal settlements and depend on informal food vendors for their daily meals, making food safety a critical urban public health issue.
- ◆ Unsafe food handling, poor storage, and unsanitary environments pose significant risks of foodborne diseases for the urban informal settlement residents.
- ◆ Majority of the food vendors in Nairobi’s informal settlements are women (68.4%) but face systemic barriers to safe food handling- such as limited access to clean water, finances, and infrastructure.
- ◆ Gender disparities in food safe practices were observed, with male vendors often practicing better hygiene – than female vendors, mainly due to their greater access to vital resources and infrastructure.
- ◆ Structural factors like access to clean water, secure selling space occupancy, and sanitation play a greater role in food safety than individual knowledge alone, emphasizing the need for systemic interventions.
- ◆ Policymakers must prioritize gender-responsive interventions – focusing on infrastructure, training, and financial inclusion – to enhance food safety and public health outcomes.

Introduction

Informal settlements in Nairobi, such as Kibera, host over half of the city’s population and rely heavily on mainly female informal food vendors for daily sustenance. Food safety is a critical public health issue, yet, in informal settlements like Kibera, it remains under-prioritized in policy and practice. While there are food safety policies and regulations for Nairobi County, they lack gender responsive strategies that address barriers that affect female vendors who are the majority. Furthermore, these policies are poorly regulated in informal markets exposing consumers to

contaminated food. The food vendors operate in challenging conditions of poor hygiene and sanitation, worsened by limited access to clean water and inadequate waste management systems. Thus, isolating and studying the underlying problems that form an obstacle to achieving better food safety practices is crucial in improving the food safety practices of the female and male vendors. Hence, this policy brief draws on a gendered study of food vendors in Nairobi's slums to highlight disparities in food safety practices and propose actionable recommendations.

Key Findings

Demographics

- Women who make up two-thirds of vendors are primarily middle-aged, with lower levels of education— and are more often concentrated in low-profit ventures compared to males.

Gender Disparities in Hygiene Practices:

- ◆ Male vendors were significantly more likely to wash hands after using toilets, handling raw meat, and handling garbage than female vendors due to unequal access to food safety training, resources and infrastructure.
- ◆ Women were more likely to store food on the floor and less likely to use sealed containers or use refrigeration due to lack of the relevant facilities.

Access to Infrastructure:

- ◆ Female vendors had poorer access to handwashing soap (18.33% vs. 29.8% for men), dustbins, and clean towels due to unequal purchasing power and relevant knowledge from training.
- ◆ Women vendors were disproportionately exposed (75.88% vs. 62.4%) to a poor operating environment including garbage, open sewers, and poor waste disposal facilities due to unequal access to resources to secure better selling spaces.

Economic and Structural Barriers:

- ◆ Women dominated low-profit economic ventures, while men were better represented in higher-income categories due to unequal access to business loans and time invested to the businesses based on gender roles.
- ◆ Paying city rent and attending food safety campaigns were positively associated with better practices.
- ◆ Training alone had limited impact, especially for men, suggesting a need for improved training design and follow-up.

Determinants of Safe Practices:

- ◆ Positive drivers to good food safety practices for men and women included paying city rent, attending food safety campaigns, higher profits, and sourcing food from hotels. Negative drivers included sourcing from rural farms, poor water infrastructure, and ineffective training programs.

Intersectional Challenges:

- ◆ Overall, women in informal settlements face intersecting challenges—including low income, limited financial access, poor infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints—which collectively reduce their capacity to invest in maintain safe food handling practices.

Policy Recommendations

Short-Term Measures:

- ◆ The County Government and relevant Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should provide low-cost handwashing kits (soap, jerricans, towels) to food vendors in informal markets with priority given to female vendors.
- ◆ The County Government and relevant NGOs should deliver mobile, gender-sensitive food safety training sessions in local languages through community health volunteers.
- ◆ NGOs and relevant Government entities should implement gender sensitive targeted awareness campaigns through local radio and social media platforms, reaching both vendors and consumers.
- ◆ The County Government should enhance inspection and enforcement in informal markets by empowering trained community health volunteers.

Medium-Term Measures:

- ◆ The County Government and relevant NGOs should upgrade public sanitation infrastructure: install functional handwashing stations with reliable water supply.
- ◆ The County Government should introduce microcredit and grant programs with a bias for women vendors to invest in better equipment (e.g., sealed containers, ice boxes).
- ◆ The County Government and NGOs should strengthen community-led monitoring and peer education programs led by female hygiene champions.
- ◆ The County Government and NGOs should scale up vendor-focused training programs, ensuring follow-up and monitoring for sustained behavioral change.

Long-Term Strategies:

- ◆ The County and National Governments should integrate gender-responsive food safety standards into county public health policies and planning.
- ◆ The County Government should formalize vendor licensing with incentives for compliance (e.g., reduced fees for those with training certificates).
- ◆ The County Government should invest in market infrastructure with upgraded facilities: covered vending spaces, waste disposal systems, and child-friendly facilities to support women vendors.
- ◆ The County Government and relevant NGOs should support pilot community kitchens and cold storage facilities in slum informal markets.
- ◆ The County Government should establish structural reforms linking informal vendors to safer supply chains (e.g., partnerships with hotels, cooperatives).

Implementation Considerations

- ◆ Stakeholder Engagement: Involve county health departments, women's groups, and vendor associations in co-designing interventions.
- ◆ Monitoring & Evaluation: Use gender-disaggregated data to track progress and adapt strategies.
- ◆ Challenges: Resistance to behavior change and regulation, limited funding, and infrastructural gaps. Mitigate through phased implementation and public-private partnerships.
- ◆ Capacity Building: Train health inspectors on gender-sensitive approaches and community engagement.
- ◆ Mitigation: Use community-based approaches, incentives (e.g., reduced rent for compliant vendors), and partnerships with private sector actors (water companies, hotels).

Conclusion

Food vendors in Nairobi's informal settlement play an important role in urban food security but face systemic barriers to ensure the safety and quality of the food they sell. Gender disparities further compound these challenges, increasing risks for both vendors and consumers. To address this, policymakers must adopt inclusive, gender-responsive, and multi-level interventions that integrate infrastructure improvements, financial support, and targeted training to enhance food safety in informal settings.

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