

Advancing Gender-Responsive Support to Food SMEs to Improve Access to Safe, Affordable and Nutritious Food in Malawi

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Key Messages

- Small and Medium-scale food vendors operating in local markets in Lilongwe are crucial in the provision of food to households, especially those from low-income stratum.
- Despite their significance, food vendors' ability to supply consumers with affordable, safe and nutritious food is constrained by limited accessibility to business credit, limited accessibility to business registration services, limited accessibility to business support groups and mentorship, and limited accessibility to and utilisation of sanitation facilities in the local markets.
- It is imperative, therefore, to cascade business registration services to local market levels; devise and roll-out gender-inclusive mechanisms to incentivise food traders to register their enterprises; strictly enforce food safety measures among food traders at all times and undertake periodic assessments of business development needs of food SMEs and implement appropriate actions.
- Food vendors as well, through the leadership in the local markets, should always be pro-active in demanding hygienic, safe and inclusive market infrastructure from duty bearers; be pro-active in identifying and engaging business development facilitators, and facilitate development and strengthening of business support groups among the food SMEs.

Introduction

Rapid urbanization in Malawi, particularly in the cities like Lilongwe, is transforming food systems. The development is leading most low-income households to increasingly rely on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), who mostly ply their businesses in local markets, such as Wakawaka, Chinsapo, Kauma and Nsungwi. As is the case in other African cities, food vending in Lilongwe is mostly dominated by women, reflecting cultural expectations that associate food preparation and selling with women's roles (Allen & Sachs, 2007). Food vending, however, largely takes place in a domain that is characterized by informality, weak regulatory oversight, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to business support services (such as credit and training services) (Adjei & Chan, 2023). Specifically, access to credit and business licensing remains limited; most food SMEs operate without formal registration or licenses, and access to formal credit is minimal, particularly for women, thereby hindering business growth and investments in sustainable food supply (Ngaiyaye, 2024). Men food vendors also have own specific challenges, including social stigmatisation, especially where food trading is viewed as women's work (Resnick, 2020). Furthermore, like their female counterparts, men also struggle to access credit or financial services to support operations and/or scale-up their food trading enterprises (Berry, 2009). These market and institutional conditions have potential to affect food vendors' ability to consistently provide safe, affordable, and nutritious food to consumers. Additionally, how food SMEs function and deliver on their mandate to supply safe, affordable and nutritious food could also be influenced by the intersectionality of gender, age, education, household composition and institutional factors (Ogunjobi *et al.*, 2025).

This brief, developed under the Policy Analysis for Sustainable and Healthy Foods in African Retail Markets (PASHFARM) initiative, draws on evidence from a study on the effect of intersectionality of gender and other demographic and institutional factors on food suppliers' performance at Wakawaka, Nsungwi, Chinsapo and Kauma markets in Lilongwe city. Guided by the Intersectionality Theory, the brief highlights key areas that constrain food vendors and opportunities for policy action to transform local markets to embrace inclusivity, equity and sustained performance.

Key Findings

- **Inadequate Business Credit Service:** Majority of food traders do not have access to credit for development and growth of their enterprises. This challenge is particularly prominent among young female food vendors and male food traders.
- **Limited business registration and licensing:** Most food vendors operate unregistered and unlicensed enterprises. For women aged at least 35 years, 5.4% of them have enterprises that are fully registered. For men within the same age group, none had an enterprise that was registered. Lack of business registration partly accounts for the enterprises' limited accessibility to formal business credit.

- **Limited linkages among food traders:** Many food traders do not belong to business support groups. This is particularly more serious among young female traders (aged 35 years and below). This limits food traders' opportunities to access business development services such as credit, collective bargaining, and access to group-based business capacity development initiatives.
- **Gender differentials in food safety and availability:** Male food traders who are at least 35 years old are associated with poor food availability and hygiene. This has an implication on households' accessibility, consumption and sustainability of healthy diets, especially by low-income households who depend on local markets to access their food stuffs.
- **Availability of poor sanitation facilities:** Though most markets have sanitation facilities, the facilities are poorly utilized, which do not have any positive influence on food safety.

Policy Recommendations

In a quest to address the above-presented situation in the local markets, the following are the recommendations:

- I. **The Ministry of Industrialisation, Trade and Tourism should:**
 - a) Cascade business registration and licencing services to local market/community level. The Ministry should establish more platforms (such as mobile services) to enable food SMEs register their enterprises.
 - b) Implement gender-inclusive incentives (e.g. reduced fees or group licenses) to motivate food traders to have their businesses registered.
 - c) Through the Malawi Bureau of Standards, strictly always enforce food safety and nutrition standards among food traders.
 - d) Through the Small and Medium Enterprises Development, undertake periodic assessments of business development needs of food SMEs and implement appropriate actions.
- II. **The Lilongwe City Council should:**
 - a) Undertake adequate investment in relevant market infrastructure, especially in the areas of sanitation, storage, and clean water, to ensure conducive food markets.
 - b) Undertake regular refuse collection exercise in all markets. This will make markets hygienic and safe for food trading.
- III. **Leadership of Local Markets should:**
 - a) Be pro-active in demanding, from Public Offices such as the Lilongwe City Council, hygienic, safe and inclusive market infrastructure.
 - b) Strengthen business support groups among the food SMEs.
 - c) Be pro-active in identification and engagement of business development facilitators, such as business mentors and business credit providers.

Conclusion

With the growth of urbanisation in Malawi, most households, especially those from the low-income stratum are depending on local markets as major sources of food. Nonetheless, food suppliers in these markets are constrained to supply safe, affordable and nutritious food due to a myriad of factors such as gender, socio-cultural and demographic factors, and the wider economic environment. This brief highlighted the intersectional influence of these factors on food SMEs in the provision of safe, affordable, and nutritious food in Malawi. Among other findings, food traders have challenges to access business credit, operate unregistered businesses, have no opportunity of belonging to business groups, and that there is poor access to and utilisation of sanitation facilities. The findings call for targeted interventions, including business formalization, financial inclusion, improved market infrastructure, and gender-sensitive policies to strengthen food SMEs' role in ensuring safe, nutritious, and affordable food in urban markets.

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